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THE LONG ARM

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" He raised the hand upon which his fingers were resting to his lips." Page 303.

THE LONG ARM

By

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "Anna, the Adventuress," "The Traitors," "Mysterious Mr. Sabin," etc.

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CHAPTER I

THE NOXIOUS GIFT

"LOOK behind—once more," the woman gasped, stooping a little from the saddle.

Even with that slight movement she swayed and almost fell. The man's hand supported her—he only knew with what an effort.

"There is no one in sight," he muttered, but he did not look. His heart was sick with the accumulated fear of these awful months.

They stumbled on again—a weary, heart-sickening procession. The woman's eyes were half closed, her cheeks were as pale as death, her black hair was powdered with dust, her clothing soiled and worn. She rode a small Mexican pony, itself in the last stage of exhaustion. By her side, on foot, with his left hand locked in the reins, the man stag-

gered along. In her face was the white numbness of despair, the despair which takes no count of living terrors. In his the shadow of an awful fear remained. His eyes were glazed and framed in deep black rims. His mouth was open like a dog's, his knees trembled as he ran. Once the woman had turned her head, and seeing him had shivered. He reminded her of one of those prairie wolves, into whose carcass the bullet from the last cartridge in his revolver had found its way. If her lips could have borne the effort, she would have smiled at the idea that it was for love of such a man that she had thrown away her life. The terror of this unending chase had eaten the manhood out of him. He had no longer any hope, any courage. He followed only the blind impulse of the hunted animal—to flee. He wore shirt and trousers only, his socks had gone, his feet were bleeding through the gaps in his rent shoes. Yet he had held himself bravely enough once in the great world, before the cup of Iseult had touched his lips.

A speck in front—a sombre blur upon the

landscape. He saw it and pointed. The effort of stretching out his hand overbalanced him. He fell in a heap upon the rough roadway, and for a moment lay still. Her pony also halted, trembling in every limb, his fore-legs planted outwards, his nose close to the ground.

She leaned down towards him.

"Gaston," she cried feebly, "are you hurt?"

He rose to his feet, and as he did so she noticed that he kept his head studiously turned away from the direction whence they had come. He shook the dust from his rags of clothing, and he gathered the reins once more into his hands. Of his hurts, if he had received any, he took no more notice than a dumb animal.

"Come on," he gasped. "There is wooded country ahead. We may find shelter. Come!"

"Look behind," she directed.

"No!" he answered, shivering.

"Look behind—I wish it," she insisted. "It is better to know."

Slowly he turned his head. There was little room for expression left in his face, but

she saw the slow dilation of his eyes, the animal drop of his jaw. He stood as one turned to stone, gazing back along the way by which they had come. As the woman understood, she drew one long sigh and slipped from the saddle, mercifully unconscious. The man did not heed her. His eyes were still fixed upon that speck in the distance, a cloud of dust, a man on horseback. Curiously enough, his most poignant feeling was one of relief. It was the end at last then, the end of a chase surely more terrible than any since the days when sin itself was born.

She opened her eyes for a moment.

"It is he?" she questioned.

"It is he," the man repeated, as one might tell the time to a stranger.

She pointed to the revolver in his belt, but he shook his head. She remembered that his cartridges were all gone.

"Kill me some other way," she pleaded.

"I could not," he answered. "I am not strong enough. I have no strength left. We have been very foolish, Christine. We should have waited in the city. There it

"He stood as one turned to stone, gazing back along the way by which they had come."

would have been man to man at least. Now I am broken. I cannot strike a blow. I cannot even kill myself. I cannot kill you. I have no strength left. This flight by night and by day has robbed me of it. It was foolish!"

She turned her face to the ground with a little sob.

"I will hold my breath and die," she declared. "He shall not see me like this."

The man stared at her dully. What did it matter, the rents in her garments, such trifles in the presence of death! He was a stupid fellow, and he had never gauged the measure of a woman's vanity.

The speck in the distance grew more distinct, the cloud of dust larger. Then there came to the man a last access of strength, a strength wholly artificial, begotten of the terror which lay like ice upon his heart. He plucked at the woman and half helped, half pushed her upon the waiting pony.

"He will catch us! He is here at last, Christine," he jabbered. "We must get to the wood. Perhaps we can hide, and strike

him down when he is looking for us. I have a stone in my pocket I picked up. It is sharp—sharp as a knife! If I could get behind him——"

The woman shivered, but she suffered herself to be led. The pony staggered on as though every step might be its last. The man ran, breathing like a crazy machine, and with face almost black. And in their hearts they both knew that it was useless. Their pursuer was only cantering his horse, and he was gaining at every stride. Down the wind came the sound of his voice, the voice of the untired man who triumphs.

"Gently, my friends, gently! Do you not see that it is I, Mannister, who calls? Why do you hurry so?"

Over on his face went the hunted man, nerveless, and stricken with a new fear at the sound of that mocking voice. The pony stopped and swayed—collapsing rather than falling in the rough way. The woman lay there with her face to the earth and her arms stretched out. The man commenced to groan like a stricken animal, or else he too might

have been taken for dead. So they lay when their pursuer, on a great bay mare as yet untired, rode up to them.

He sat on his horse looking from one to the other. He was a man of something apparently less than middle age, with smooth fair hair and face, which the hand of time seemed to have treated kindly. Only a sudden and very terrible light flashed in his eyes as he looked downward at the woman, a light which lingered, however, but for that single second, and passed away leaving his whole expression nonchalant, almost undisturbed.

"Upon my word," he observed, resting his left hand lightly upon his horse's flank, "I am distressed to have been the cause of so much suffering. You have been unreasonable, my dear Gaston, to force a lady into undertaking a journey such as this. A few words with you—that was all I asked. Surely it was not worth while to have given me all this trouble, and to have put yourselves to such inconvenience! My dear Christine, I must confess that the state of your wardrobe distresses me!"

Her shoulders shook, but she did not look up.

"And you too, my dear Gaston," he continued, sitting still easily upon his horse and lighting a cigarette. "I must confess that it pains me to see you in such guise. We met last—I think that it was at the Cavalry Club, the day young Pennant tried to wear a roll collar with a dress coat. I remember your remarks upon the occasion, scathing but well deserved. You were always our recognized authority upon matters of the person. It grieves me to see you like this, Gaston. Is that indeed a shirt, the remnants of which you are still wearing? And, my dear fellow, pardon me, but your feet and hands—every finger-nail gone, I declare. I am ashamed to ask you, but upon my word —when did you take a bath last?"

The man called Gaston staggered to his feet. With the poor remnants of his strength, he threw himself against his persecutor, his nervous, bony fingers locked around the stone which was his only weapon. It was after all but a pitiful effort. The newcomer

"With the poor remnants of his strength he threw himself against his persecutor."

touched his horse with the spur, and his assailant rolled in the dust.

"Get up, my friend," the former remarked pleasantly, looking downwards. "You and I must have our little conversation together, I suppose. Let us go as far as the wood there. We shall be better alone."

Slowly and painfully the fallen man staggered to his feet. The newcomer withdrew one foot from its stirrup.

"Hold on to this," he directed. "I will ride carefully."

It was barely a hundred yards to the border of the wood, but more than once the man faltered and almost collapsed. When at last they reached their destination, the sudden change from the dazzling sunlight to the cool darkness of the thick trees, was too much for him. He groped for a moment like a drunken man, then staggered forward and fell. Mannister stooped down and dragged him to his feet. For a moment he held him at arm's length, studying him with all the immeasurable contempt of the brave man for a proven coward. Then he placed him on a fallen log with his back to a tree trunk.

"Don't shake so, man," he said, feeling in his pocket and producing a flask. "Drink some of this. It will give you the sort of courage you need."

Gaston Sinclair grabbed at the flask, a sudden gleam of desire flashing in his glazed eyes. His nerveless fingers failed utterly to loosen the stopper. Mannister leaned over and took the flask from the hand which still clung almost passionately to it.

"You shall have your drink," he said. "Don't be afraid. Here!"

A turn of his strong sinewy fingers, and the stopper was out. He poured some of the brandy into a silver cup and held it out to the other man.

"Drink," he said. "Take it all! Don't be afraid. There is no poison there!"

The man drank and gasped and drank again. Mannister turned from him with the air of one who seeks to avoid an ugly sight. He looked through a gap in the trees out on to the plain, his eyes travelled backwards along that rough road to where the woman still lay. As he watched she moved her

position, sitting up on the roadside, her head buried in her hands, her attitude, notwithstanding her soiled and dishevelled clothes, reminiscent of a former subtle and notable elegance. The man's face remained unchanged, but his fingers dug into the bark of the fallen tree on which they sat. This woman had been his wife. She had lain in his arms, her lips against his, her passionate whispering like wonderful music in his ears. She had been his—she had loved him for a while at any rate—perhaps even now! And she had brought him into the shadow of the greatest tragedy which men and women have woven out of the loom of life. She had left him for this creature by his side, left him to become that most pitiable object on the face of the earth—a forsaken husband. Yet he felt no anger for her—little even for the poor companion of her flight. Understanding had come to him during the long nights and weary days of his wonderful chase. Up and down the world, across continents and seas, through great cities and across the desert places he had followed them,

his hand ever stretched out, until the fear which never left them had become a living thing, and their journeying a nerveless hysterical flight. He had left them no peace, no respite. When in some out of the way corner of the world they had fancied themselves secure for a time, a telegram had been handed to them—"I am coming-"—and the chase began anew. And this was the end. They were broken—absolutely at his mercy—broken body and soul. He lit another cigarette, and turned away from the contemplation of that bent figure. Life, after all, was an unsatisfying thing.

He turned round suddenly. Sinclair had armed himself with a short stick, and his hand was lifted to strike. Mannister laughed as he struck down his arm.

"Don't be a fool," he said scornfully. "Can't you see that if I meant to kill you I could have twisted your neck at any moment. Sit down and listen to me."

Sinclair gasped.

"Give me another drink," he begged. Mannister measured him out a small quantity.

"No more," he said firmly. "Sit down now. I want to talk to you."

The man grovelled before him. His brain, giddy with the fumes of the spirit, held but one thought. He was to live! Mannister did not mean to kill him! It was unnatural —impossible!

"You are going to kill us, to kill us both!" he cried, in a frenzied whisper. "We heard of the oath you took. A year ago I could have met you like a man. To-day we are broken, both of us. We have lived and slept with fear so long."

"Your lives," Mannister answered calmly, "are not worth a stray pin to me. Live or die, I am indifferent. You will come to no harm from me. If I have desired vengeance," he added, with a faint smile, "don't you think that I have it? You are not the Gaston Sinclair that you were, my friend. The lady, your companion, too, has apparently suffered."

Sinclair's body was shaken with groans.

"If only we could have stopped," he moaned. "Oh, it is terrible to be hunted! You begin to run—and you can't stop. You

want to turn round and face the thing behind —and you can't. And your nerves snap one by one, and your courage dies ; you forget that you are a human being. You rush blindly on, always terrified. Every time you look behind your heart sinks ; in every crowd you search frantically for one face ; every resting place you enter with a sob of fear. Locked doors are useless. There is a knock! You must open ! A waiter, perhaps, but the sweat is on your forehead, you are shaking like a leaf. The man thinks you are mad. Everywhere you are suspected—shunned. Every pair of eyes that meets yours seems to carry behind them the knowledge that you are running away. Oh, Hell ! It is Hell, Hell ! "

" This," Mannister declared, with a pleasant smile, " is most interesting. You have had quite an experience, my dear Sinclair, and you speak of it most eloquently. Now you will kindly abandon this somewhat melodramatic attitude of yours, and—listen to me."

The last three words were spoken with a

sudden tense note of command. Sinclair, whose head had sunk between his hands, looked slowly up.

"Well?" he said.

"When I first left England and followed you to Genoa," Mannister said, "my intentions were perfectly simple, and, I may add, absolutely primitive. I meant to kill you both on sight. I lost time just at first, and the chase became a long one. Lately I have had advices from England—and I begin to understand the game. It was a little more complex than I thought at first. It was a little more complex, I think, than you fully understood."

"I was a fool!" Sinclair groaned, "a hopeless, miserable fool!"

"You were the tool of clever men," Mannister continued. "So was I. It was part of a conspiracy. I can see that now. And while I have been away our friends over there have proceeded to strip me bare and divide the plunder. What was your share, my dear friend?"

"I cannot tell you anything about it,"

Sinclair groaned. "You know very well that I cannot. You know the penalty."

Mannister smiled.

"You will never," he remarked suavely, "be nearer death than you are just now."

There was silence for several moments between the two men. The little wood was singularly free from all animal noises. Not even a breath of wind was stirring in the trees. Mannister spoke again.

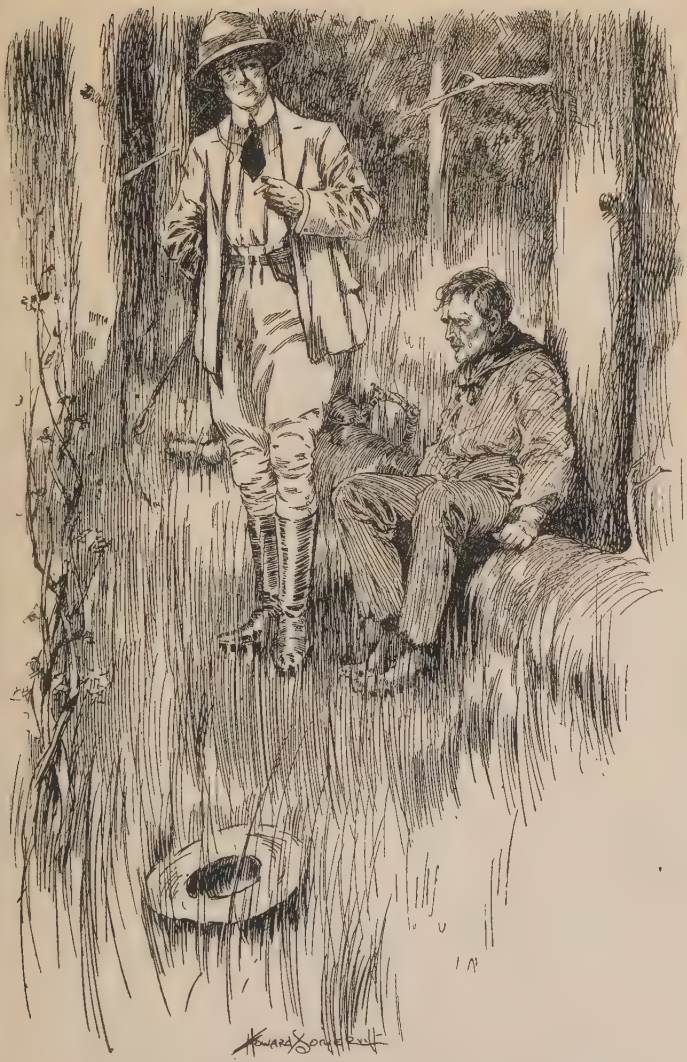
"You will probably," he said, "never come back to England. In that case you are safe from our friends. You have at least a chance of escape. From me, unless you obey, you have none."

"I thought you said that you were not going to kill me," Sinclair declared sullenly.

"Under reasonable conditions, no!" Mannister said. "Such desire as I had for vengeance is—well, shall we say gratified. You will never be the man you were again, Sinclair."

"Curse you!" Sinclair answered bitterly.

"Curse those others—and your own vanity—not me," Mannister replied. "I wish you



"'You will never,' he remarked suavely, 'be nearer death than you are just now.'"

no further harm now than has already come to you. But the truth I mean to know, and as surely as you refuse to tell me, so surely do you die!"

There was a moment's silence. Sinclair was thinking of all the things from which he must cut himself off for ever, the clubs, the restaurants, the city haunts and friends—all these things must go. And yet it was something to live! Only an hour ago, life itself would have seemed a priceless and wonderful gift. It was no time to bargain, this.

"It was Colin Stevens who planned it," he said slowly. "There were seven of the others who were in it."

"The names of the other seven?" Mannister demanded.

"Colin Stevens was the leader," Sinclair repeated, unwillingly.

"The names of the other seven," Mannister said calmly, "or I shall wring your neck. It is not a pleasant death."

"Phil Rundermere."

"The blackguard! I saved him from

ruin once!" Mannister whispered softly. "Go on!"

"John Dykes."

"Of course! Well?"

"Sophy de la Mere."

"Ladies, too!" Mannister murmured. "Well, she had no cause to love me. Go on."

"Fred Hambledon."

"Good! Who else?"

"Benjamin Traske."

"Poor boy! He went where he was led, of course. That makes five."

"Ernest Jacobs."

"False little brute!" Mannister murmured. "I judged he must have been in it. One more, Sinclair."

"You know enough," Sinclair muttered. "Let the other one go. He was led into it, as I was. He never did you any real injury."

"Perhaps not, Sinclair," Mannister answered smoothly, "but nevertheless a bargain is a bargain, if you please. I must know his name. Or shall I guess it? Dick Polsover, eh? Ah, I thought so! Your own

particular friend, Sinclair. Well, it's hard to have to give him away, isn't it ? "

" You know their names now," Sinclair said, with a sudden gleam of curiosity. " What are you going to do ? You cannot go back to England ! You would never face it ! "

" I am not quite so sure about that, my over-sanguine friend," Mannister answered. " If ever I do, you may go down on your knees and pray for those eight men—if you think it will do them any good. By the by, you, I suppose, were the decoy to get me out of England. It was for that purpose that you made love to my wife. What did you get out of it ? "

" Five thousand pounds ! " Sinclair answered. " I was to have had more, but it has never come."

" A bad bargain," Mannister declared. " Why you must have spent nearly that running away from me."

" We have spent it all," Sinclair answered. " We have not enough to live on for a month."

" I am afraid," Mannister declared, swing-

ing his riding boot against the trunk of the tree, "that in making you a present of the gift of life, I am not doing you a very great service—you or the woman who is now dependent upon you. You will have to work. Sinclair, I am afraid. You never liked work, did you?"

"Haven't you nearly finished with me?" Sinclair answered. "I must look after—her. We need food."

"You will find plenty in the waggon outside," Mannister answered. "The lady whom you tactfully allude to as 'her', is already being attended to. I have a fancy for travelling comfortably, and notwithstanding this attack upon my fortunes, I am not quite a pauper. Do you know, Sinclair, I fancy that our eight friends may have been just a little disappointed. I never believed in keeping all my eggs in one basket. They looked upon me as a sort of Monte Christo, but there were more treasure caves than one. Come, Sinclair, we will go. I have learned from you all that I required to know. Come to the edge of the wood. There is one thing more which I

have to say to you. Come to the entrance of the wood there, and stand by my side."

Sinclair staggered up, a weak, broken-spirited creature of a man; he was bent almost double, and he reached scarcely to the other's shoulder. Mannister showed no signs of fatigue. His white linen riding suit was unsoiled, his tie and collar immaculate. His hands, though brown, were unblistered, and his nails well cared for. He might very well have been riding through the hills on a Simla picnic. If he had suffered through that tireless chase, his hard bronzed face showed little signs of it. Compared with him, the creature by his side was negligible.

His left hand he laid upon Sinclair's drooping shoulder, with his right forefinger he pointed to where they had left the woman. A covered waggon was there now, and a fire smoking. The woman herself was just visible, reclining in a camp chair. Mannister's voice was slower and more deliberate.

"Sinclair," he said, "you see there your life. You have done me, as a man, the greatest injury which one man has learnt in nine-

teen hundred years to inflict upon another. In leaving you alive upon the earth, I make no pretence at forgiving you. To kick you into eternity would be, however, only the caprice of a child. The vengeance of God and man strikes deeper. The woman is yours by right of theft. I leave you together, and I leave you the care of her a charge upon your life. Only remember that my arm is long, and as you deal with her, so shall you be dealt with by me."

"She loves me no more! She is weary already!" the man muttered. "There is no path in life which we could tread together."

"Too late," Mannister answered. "You must hew one axe in hand, even if it be through the wilderness. And for the rest, the love of a woman is to be won by the man on whom she leans. You must win hers, Sinclair. You played the lover well enough, no doubt, when you took her from my home. See that you play it again, and to good purpose."

"I lied to her! I worked upon her jealousy!" Sinclair muttered.

"My common-sense has already assured me of that," Mannister answered, "else she would never have left me for you. Never mind. You must do your best. There is but one royal road through life for you—and along that road you must go hand in hand, or alone to your grave. For the smaller matters, you will find that there is money enough in her name to keep you from starvation, and I shall require to hear of your marriage within two months. My divorce decree is before the courts."

"She will not marry me," Sinclair said sullenly. "We do not speak. All day and night she weeps because of what she has done."

"What you won once," Mannister said, "when surely everything was against you, you can win again now when she is alone in the world, and the poor remnants of her honour are in your keeping. At any rate you must try. Remember that it is for your life that you plead. Come."

The two men approached the camp side by side, Mannister leading his horse by the bridle, tall, slim, debonair; Sinclair hobbling

by his side, bent and broken, with dulled eyes and wandering footsteps. The woman leaned forward to watch them coming. Her lips were parted, a tinge of colour had come back to her cheeks. Her beautiful eyes were fastened upon Mannister—it seemed as though she were fighting with all there was of life left in her, to draw from his stony face one single sign of recognition. He came and went amongst his servants, giving brief orders; once he almost brushed her skirts, and passed by with blank, unseeing eyes. She did not exist for him! He did not speak to her! He could ignore her so completely—he could act as though she were already dead! Faster and faster came her breath, and whiter grew her lips. She loved him! She had known it in the long nights, she had felt it like a mortal pain piercing her burden of intolerable shame. Now he was coming nearer—he had passed. He was upon his horse—how well he always looked upon horseback, and her fingers were gripping the shoulder of the poor creature whom she loathed.

"Remember," he said, looking downwards

"And her fingers were gripping the shoulder of the poor creature whom she loathed."

with a flash from his steely blue eyes. " Remember, Sinclair ! "

His horse plunged, and he was galloping away. She sprang to her feet—a cry of anguish broke at last from her dry lips.

" He is coming back ! " she shrieked. " Tell me that he is coming back ! "

" He is never coming back," Sinclair said sullenly.

She looked at him for one moment, and her heart sickened with loathing. Away along the level road the figure of the retreating horseman grew smaller and smaller. She tottered, and fell forward upon her face. Sinclair sat still, and understood why he was alive.

CHAPTER II

TRASKE AND THE BRACELET

GLITTER of glass and perfume of flowers, the music of women's laughter, the sparkle of jewels upon white bosoms, all the nameless air of content and well-being which pervades such a Restaurant as Luigi's during the holy hour of all Englishmen—the hour when he dines. The little orchestra, whose soft restrained playing was one of the charms of the place, had just finished the "Salut D'Amour." Smoothly shining heads were bent towards more elaborate coiffures; whispers and smiles and glances, lit with meaning, flashed backwards and forwards between the occupants of the small tables. Dark visaged *maîtres d'hôtel*, deft and eager, watched the scene with interest. At one table only, a large round one near the door, were there any signs of dissatisfaction.

The table was laid for four, and there were but three men present. They represented the obvious attitude of waiting for the tardy guest. The eldest of the party, bald-headed, with gold-rimmed spectacles, pink cheeks, and smooth-shaven face, looked continually at his watch and bent forward to watch every new arrival. The two other men were talking to one another in earnest whispers.

Luigi himself came up to the table, and bowed to his customers with all the ease of a long acquaintance.

"Mr. Polsover is later this evening, gentlemen," he remarked. "You think that he will come, eh? You see it is half-past eight, and the dinner was ordered for eight o'clock punctual."

"I'm hanged if we'll wait any longer, Luigi," declared the man with the gold-rimmed glasses. "Tell them to serve up dinner. By the by, have either of you fellows seen Polsover to-day?"

"I saw him only an hour or so ago," Traske declared—Traske, the junior of the party, in white waistcoat and tie of the latest

pattern, sleek, well groomed, immaculate, after the amazing fashion of the struggling stockbroker. "He was in at Poole's trying a coat on, and we walked down the arcade."

"Say anything about to-night?" the other asked.

"Only that we should meet again later. By Jove, here he is! Polsover, you blackguard! Do you know the time?"

They all turned towards him with a little chorus of protests and questions. And then as suddenly there was silence. The new arrival, tall, slim, and darker than the average Englishman, was slowly unwinding his scarf and passing his hat to the attendant. The eyes of the three men were fastened upon his face. Traske passed a cocktail across the table.

"Have a drink, old chap," he said.

Polsover took the glass, and held it with difficulty to lips almost as pale as the white kid gloves which as yet he had not removed. He drained it, and set it down empty. Then he took his place at the table. The silence was strained and unnatural.

Waiters and *maîtres d'hôtel* melted away

"Held it with difficulty to lips almost as pale as the white kid gloves which as yet he had not removed."

for a moment. Traske leaned across the table. His voice was lowered almost to a whisper—a whisper which, notwithstanding all his efforts, was hoarse and shaky. The words came out with a jerk—harsh, staccato.

"What's wrong, Polsover?"

Polsover glanced around half fearfully. His face was still the colour of chalk. He leaned across the table, and the heads of the four men were close together.

"Mannister is in London," he whispered. "I have seen him. I believe that he is coming here."

Something unique in the way of oaths broke from the lips of the man in the gold-rimmed spectacles, who presided over the little gathering. The other two simply stared. It was incredible, astounding! They neglected for the first few moments even to ask him the obvious questions. Then the coming of a waiter imposed upon them the ghastly necessity of concealing their terror. Conversation of some sort was necessary. Polsover spoke of wine, and ordered the magnum which stood in the ice pail by their

side, to be immediately opened. Never were glasses raised to the lips and drained more eagerly. Polsover, who had had time to realize this thing, was now the most self-possessed of the party.

"I went into the bar at the *Savoy*," he explained, "to have a Dubonnet before coming across. He was there, in travelling clothes, just arrived I should think. I nearly went through the floor."

"What did he say? Did he speak to you?" Traske asked.

"Just as though we had parted yesterday," Polsover declared. "I—I had a drink with him."

The thing was driven home to them now, beyond a doubt. Polsover had stood before the bar and drunk with him. No one could do that with a ghost.

"He asked—after everybody," Polsover continued, "just as though he had been away for a week-end. He said—when he had changed—that he was coming on here."

Hambledon drank his third glass of champagne, and made a brave attempt to break

through the stupefaction which seemed to have clouded the intellects of all of them. Hambledon was the man in the gold-rimmed spectacles, who seemed to play the host.

"Look here," he said, "we're not a pack of babies, to be scared to death just because one man's come back from the dead. Mannister can't eat us. We've played it low down against him, but we're inside the law. He can't know much. If Sinclair and he have ever come face to face, there would be more shooting than talking done. I doubt if he knows anything. Remember—if he comes he is welcome. Not too much surprise, mind—and no explanations to-night."

"About the mine?" Traske asked hoarsely.

"Silence!" Hambledon declared.

Then they heard Luigi's little cry of surprise merged into one of welcome, and the thunderbolt fell. Tall and lean, with bronzed face and clear, sunburnt skin, Mannister, in his trim evening clothes, and unchanging air of complete self-composure, seemed, as he slowly advanced towards them, a perfectly natural part of the place and its sur-

roundings. Only these four men who had known him intimately could detect some slight but significant change in the expression of the man who came so calmly forward to greet them.

"Mannister, by all that's wonderful!" Hambledon exclaimed, rising and holding out both his hands.

"Mannister!" the others echoed, and rose to their feet.

There was a moment's pause of breathless expectancy. They felt that the next few seconds would decide the momentous question as to whether this man had come as friend or enemy. He himself seemed for some reason inclined to prolong the period of uncertainty. He stood quite still for an appreciable space of time, looking at the four men who had risen to their feet prepared to receive him with every appearance of good fellowship, and yet, notwithstanding all their efforts, showing something of the nervousness which they all felt, in their face and manners. With a little laugh, Mannister threw his coat to the cloak-room attendant who had followed

him in, and leisurely drawing off his gloves, extended his hand to Hambledon.

"Can you make room for an unexpected visitor?" he asked. "It's like old times to see a magnum of Pomeroy. Hambledon, you haven't changed a bit. Traske, you are looking fit as ever. Jacobs, how are you? Where are you all with your dinner? I'll chip in if I may."

The key-note of their conversation was struck. Their welcome was more than effusive,—it was almost uproarious. His glass was filled, and a place was hastily laid for him. There was no lack of conversation. He had been away for more than a year. There were a hundred people to ask after, endless little pieces of news and gossip to retail to him. But the greater things they left alone. No mention was made of the reason of his sudden disappearance from the country, or of the man in search of whom he had gone. Nor did they speak of certain transactions which had taken place during his absence, but for which they knew very well that a day of reckoning must come. There

were certain names, too, which Mannister left alone until dinner was almost over. Then he asked after them, one by one, and it seemed to the four men who answered, that there was something sinister in these inquiries, apparently so casual, and yet embracing just those men and no others.

"Colin Stevens is not here to-night, I see," Mannister began.

"He is over in Paris for a few days," Hambledon answered.

Mannister nodded.

"And Rundermere, Phil Rundermere?" he asked.

"Phil's about as usual," Hambledon answered, "but a little down on his luck. He's had a very bad season's racing."

"John Dykes?"

"He may be in any moment," Traske declared, a little uneasily. "He doesn't often dine with us. He's had gout badly, and he's trying a diet cure."

Hambledon drank a glass of wine during the momentary silence which followed. He felt the perspiration breaking out upon his

forehead. These names and no others. There must be a purpose in it. Seven of the eight, including those who were present, had already been inquired for. There was only one left. If he should ask for her and no one else, they would know that it was war. They would know that their danger was no fancied one.

"And last, but not least," Mannister asked, looking intently into the contents of his glass, "la belle Sophy, Mrs. De la Mere, unless she has changed her name?"

"She is dining here to-night," Hambledon answered. "She is sitting immediately behind you."

Mannister smiled.

"Presently," he said, "I must pay my respects to her. It is very interesting to hear about so many old friends."

Then he was silent for several moments, still apparently watching the bubbles rise in his champagne glass, and the four men stole glances one at the other. He had asked after them all, all the eight! They could not doubt any longer but that it was war!

Coffee and liqueurs were set before them. Already half the diners in the place had left. Mannister glanced at the clock.

"Half-past nine," he said. "Remember that I have been away from London a year. What does one do now? Have we any——?"

He glanced meaningly at Hambledon, who shook his head.

"No, no!" he said. "There is nothing of that sort on just now. We might go to a music-hall for an hour, and round to Cumberland Mansions afterwards, all of us except Ben, that is. Ben is a reformed character. In fact, this is something in the way of a farewell dinner. Ben is going to be married next month to somebody very young and very rich."

Traske was obviously annoyed.

"Don't listen to Hambledon's rot," he said. "But that reminds me. I must be off."

Mannister stretched out a detaining hand.

"Don't hurry," he said. "Remember that your old friends, too, have claims. By the by, what about Sophy de la Mere?"

Traske was uncomfortable, and showed

it. Such questioning from any one else he would have resented at once.

"Oh, Sophy's all right," he declared. "Not likely to round upon an old pal."

Sophy herself appeared, radiant in white lace, a picture hat, and a feather boa. She, perhaps, more than any of them, had suffered from nerves when first she had seen Mannister enter the restaurant, but she had had time to get over it, and she was a woman. So she came up to him with outstretched hands and a brilliant smile. It was simpler to treat his absence as something quite ordinary, to ignore those things concerning which speech was difficult.

"Back again to Babylon, my friend," she said lightly. "Welcome home! I am delighted to see you."

Mannister stood and smiled down upon her, his hand resting on the back of his chair.

"I see that your friends," he remarked, "have dispersed. Won't you sit down and have some coffee with us? It will be quite like old times."

"On one condition," she answered, "and

that is that you all come round to my rooms afterwards. Dicky is going to South Africa to-morrow, and we are going to give him a send-off, music and bridge and a riotous time generally. You'll all come, won't you ? If you say yes I'll sit down, and we can all go back together."

"I shall be charmed," Mannister answered. "I do not think that any of us could refuse such an invitation."

His glance rested as though by accident upon Traske, who was suddenly conscious of a feeling of apprehension for which he could not account.

"I am afraid," he said, rising, "that I shall have to be excused. I was just explaining to Mannister here——"

"You will not be excused," Mrs. De la Mere said quietly. "You are coming, Ben. I insist upon it."

There was a moment's silence. No one else intervened. They recognized that the disposal of Traske's evening had suddenly become a matter of some import.

"I am sorry," Traske began, but without

"'Back again to Babylon, my friend,' she said lightly."

any conviction in his tone, "but I really have an important engagement this evening. If to-morrow evening or——"

"No other evening will do," Mrs. De la Mere said. "I am thinking of leaving town myself almost directly, so this may very well be a farewell party in more senses than one. You must come, Ben."

Traske resumed his seat, but his face was troubled. Hambledon whispered in Mannister's ear.

"Extraordinary thing about Ben. He made up to a little girl somewhere in the suburbs just because she had a lot of money, and upon my word I believe it's coming off. Talks of chucking the city and town life, and going to live in the country."

"Is he honest, do you suppose?" Mannister asked.

Hambledon smiled—an unpleasant smile his.

"Until he gets hold of the money. He's got round the girl somehow or other, I suppose. She's very pretty and very pious, and that's all we know about her. He's taken good care to keep her away from all of us!"

Mannister leaned back in his chair and smiled to himself thoughtfully. He glanced across at Traske, and the smile deepened, although there was little of mirth in it.

* * * * *

In the vestibule of the restaurant, Sophy de la Mere drew Mannister on one side.

"I want you to drive home with me," she said. "The others can follow us in hansoms."

Mannister bowed.

"I shall be charmed, of course," he said, and followed her across the pavement into the little electric coupé. She raised her veil as they swung off, and he looked at her critically. She had certainly aged, and there was more powder upon her cheeks than she had used a year ago.

"Look here," she said, "I know very well that your coming back means no good to any of us. I watched you come and I watched the others' faces. They are scared out of their lives, but I don't suppose they have had the pluck to talk to you as I mean to. We served you a low-down miserable trick, a trick that no man is likely to forgive. We

gambled upon your never being able to show yourself in England again, and you see we lost. Don't think I am going to cry off for my share. I know very well you're not the forgiving sort."

Mannister looked at her curiously.

"If one might venture to inquire——" he began.

"Don't interrupt me," she continued. "We have only a few minutes, and I want to make the most of them. You're back here to get level with all of us, and I have a sort of an idea that you'll do it. You can't collect our heads or reputations, or whatever you mean to strike at, into one, and destroy them at one blow. You'll have to take us separately. Have you any choice as to the order?"

Mannister began to understand. He thrust his hand into his breast coat pocket, and drew from a small pocket-book a folded strip of paper. He spread it open upon his knee, and moved a little so that the electric light at the back of the coupé fell upon it.

"You see here," he remarked, "a list of eight names. They are in order, not alphabeti-

cally, as you will observe. You see who heads the list."

She peered forward.

"Benjamin Traske!" she exclaimed.

He nodded, and replaced the paper in his pocket.

"Are you not curious," he asked, "to see where yours comes?"

"Not I," she answered quickly. "When my turn comes I shall be ready. Listen. I am not offering to make a bargain with you. I want no mercy for what I did. If my name stands second upon that list, I am ready even now to tell you to do your worst. But of my own free will I offer you this." She touched with her slim forefinger the place where that paper had been. "I will help you with that first name."

He smiled.

"So you do not like the idea," he remarked, "of our friend Benjamin's marriage?"

"I do not," she answered. "To tell you the truth, I do not mean that marriage to take place."

"You would prefer," he suggested softly,

"that our young friend should find himself involved, perhaps——"

"Never mind that," she interrupted. "I have a scheme. I only ask you when the time comes to play up to me. The girl he is engaged to is a little Puritan and a fool. I do not wish to see her miserable for life. When she understands what sort of a man Benjamin Traske really is, she will never look at him again."

Mannister nodded.

"I will be ready," he answered. "When do you suppose this opportunity will come?"

"To-night!" she whispered in his ear. "You will understand presently."

The coupé had drawn up before the block of flats in which she lived. Mannister helped his companion to alight, and as they passed into the building, the other hansoms turned into the Square. Traske, who was the last to descend, stood for a moment upon the pavement, looking across the Square to where the wind was moving softly in the tops of the blossoming lime trees. A faint breath of their perfume reached him where he stood,

and brought with it sudden swift thoughts of a garden not so very far away, a quaint, old-fashioned, walled garden, full of sweet-smelling flowers, shadowy corners, and seats in unexpected places. Even now she would be walking there waiting for him. A sudden passionate distaste for the sort of evening which lay before him checked his footsteps even as he turned away. He could see it all through those dark curtained windows; the little rooms, over-scented, over-hot; the soft, sense-stirring music; the dancing, not quite such as one would see in a ball-room; the champagne, the flushed faces, the sense of subtle excitement, unwholesome, ignoble. It was the first time he had felt any such revulsion, and he knew very well that it was only a temporary one. These had been his pleasures, this the manner of his life. He had looked for nothing better, desired nothing better. He had lived all his days as one of the herd, and he knew it. To-night he was suddenly conscious of a hopeless, passionate desire to get away. Almost he fancied that he could hear the girl's voice

calling to him softly, calling him away for ever from all the things that lay across the threshold of Mrs. De la Mere's flat. He turned abruptly round. In a moment he would have crossed the Square. Suddenly a hand fell upon his shoulder. He turned round to find Mannister there.

"My dear fellow," Mannister said, "they're all in the lift waiting for you. What are you doing, moon-gazing out here?"

"I have a headache," Traske answered. "I am going home."

Mannister's hand tightened on his shoulder like a vice.

"No," he said, "I think not! You are coming with me."

* * * * *

Inside, the evening passed very much as many an evening before had passed. A little orchestra was tucked away in the corner of the larger of Mrs. De la Mere's sitting-rooms. Furniture was pushed back. They danced when they felt inclined, they sat about and talked. On the sideboard in the smaller

room were many bottles of champagne, which, however, grew steadily less. Several young ladies connected with the theatrical profession had been summoned from their rooms, and other friends whom Mrs. De la Mere had invited kept coming and going. Traske, after an hour or so of weariness, gave in. Mrs. De la Mere herself took him into the smaller room, and made him open champagne for her. When he came back to dance his face was flushed, and his whole manner changed. He had forgotten all about the garden in the suburbs, and those other things which had troubled him for a moment. At thirty-five it is hard to reform. So the music went faster. A young lady, amidst uproarious applause, danced a 'Pas Seul,' and it was Traske who took her out afterwards and opened champagne for her. The air was blue with cigarette smoke, faces were flushed and hot, voices not altogether steady. Only two people remained unchanged, and they were Mannister and Mrs. De la Mere. Dicky, in whose honour the feast was given, sat upon the table, which had been pushed into a

corner of the room, with a bottle of champagne in one hand and a glass in the other.

"We'll lock the doors," he declared. "We won't let a soul out till eight o'clock, and then we'll all go round to breakfast at my place."

"You can stay as late as you like," Mrs. De la Mere answered, "but the band must go at three. They don't allow music afterwards."

"We will dance in the street," Dicky declared. "Remember it's my last night in England."

Nevertheless presently a few people began to slip away. Traske, who had been left alone for a minute, moved suddenly to the window of the smaller room, which chanced to be empty, and throwing it open, leaned out. A rush of night air upon his face, cool, delicious, brought to his uncertain brain some glimmering apprehension of those other things, the memory of which had troubled him once before. He moved resolutely to a corner, took up his overcoat and hat, and had reached the door before a shout assailed him.

It was Hambledon who had suddenly called attention to his going, and the others all streamed through the doorway.

"You sneak, Ben!" Mrs. De la Mere cried, "trying to steal away without even saying good-night to your hostess! I'm ashamed of you. Come back at once, sir, and take off that coat."

Traske looked as though he had been surprised in something worse than a mere attempt to make his escape from a scene of which he had suddenly tired. His face was flushed, and he looked confused. He muttered something about the rooms being hot and having a headache, and he still tried to go. Mannister laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"We can't spare you, Traske," he said; "positively, we can't spare you yet. Do you mean to say that you were going without even wishing your hostess good-night?"

There was no opportunity for Traske to reply, there was no opportunity just then for any one else in the room to say a word. From the other room came Miss Bella Delmain, a burning spot of colour in her cheeks,

her eyes lit with anger, her voice shrill with passion.

"My bracelet!" she cried. "I took it off only ten minutes ago, and it has gone. Don't let any one leave the room. Lock the doors, please, until my bracelet is found."

Mrs. De la Mere turned quickly round.

"You don't mean your diamond bracelet, Bella!" she exclaimed.

"I do!" was the excited response. "It cost five hundred pounds. It was given me by—never mind. It was my diamond bracelet, I tell you. Some one has taken it, some one who is in the room now. If this is a joke, for Heaven's sake drop it. I want my bracelet back. Do you hear, all of you? Who has it?"

There was a dead silence. The musicians had left off playing. Every one was drawing toward the little group of which Bella Delmain was the centre. Mannister intervened.

"Where did you leave the bracelet?" he asked.

"On the piano, not ten minutes ago," was the quick reply.

"It may have slipped down," some one suggested, and a search was made. They moved the piano, they shook the music books, they went on hands and knees upon the carpet, but there was no bracelet anywhere near the spot where it had been left. Mannister spoke again, and this time his voice was graver.

"This is a very unpleasant thing," he said. "With your permission, Mrs. De la Mere, we will lock the doors."

Traske objected vigorously.

"Such rot!" he exclaimed. "The girl will find the bracelet in a moment or two, probably upon her arm. I want to go. Do you hear, Mannister?"

Mannister eyed him coldly.

"I am afraid," he said, "that you will have to curb your impatience. Ladies and gentlemen," he added, turning back into the room, "this is a most unpleasant affair, and there is only one way out of it. First of all we must search the room, and then we must search one another."

Traske, who was more than half drunk,

shook the handle of the door with his hand.

"Rubbish!" he exclaimed. "I won't be searched, and I won't stop here while you go through such an absurd performance. Do you hear, I want to go home."

Mannister turned towards him, smiling, and at that moment Traske felt the blood run cold in his veins. There was something in Mannister's face which he did not understand, something which seemed ominous in the faint complacent smile with which he was regarded. Vaguely he felt that he was in some sort of danger, that he was trapped, and that Mannister knew all about it, and he lost for a moment control of himself.

"Give me the key, d—n you, Mannister!" he cried. "I am not going to stay for this buffoonery."

Mannister caught him by the shoulders and addressed him with mock gravity.

"My young friend," he said, "you will excuse me, but you will certainly not leave here until you have undergone the same search as we others are willing to submit to.

As you are in so great a hurry, however, and as you were on the point of bidding us a somewhat unceremonious farewell, we will consult your convenience by searching you first."

Then Traske knew what was coming, and his knees shook and his cheeks were ashen pale. He was not even surprised when the bracelet was drawn from his breast pocket. He looked wildly around and saw the same thing in every face.

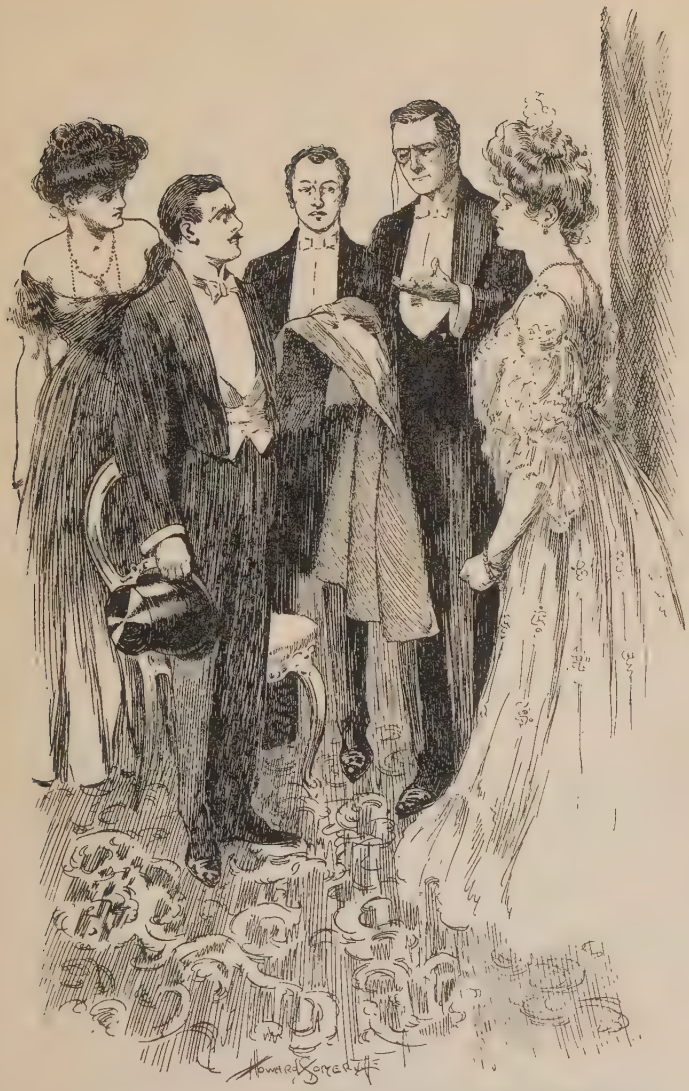
"I never took it!" he cried. "My overcoat was on the floor, and some one must have put the bracelet there. Sophy, Mannister, Hambledon, you don't really believe that I stole it!"

But there was no reply from any one of the three. Only Mrs. De la Mere crossed the room swiftly, and stooping down pressed the electric bell.

"What is that for?" Traske cried. "What are you going to do?"

Mrs. De la Mere faced him coldly.

"I can stand a great deal," she said, "from those who have been my friends, but such



"He looked wildly around and saw the same thing in every face."

a theft as this, in my own rooms, passes even my forgiveness. John," she added, turning to the night porter who had answered the bell, "I want you to call up a policeman, please."

Traske raved, and struggled to escape, but Mannister's hand was like a vice upon his shoulder. The musicians and the few remaining guests hurried away by the other door. When the policeman arrived, only Bella Delmain, Mrs. De la Mere, Mannister, and Traske himself, were left. Traske fell on his knees.

"You are not going to charge me with this?" he cried. "You know very well that it will ruin me!"

Mannister smiled. Already they could hear the heavy footsteps ascending the stairs.

"It may ruin you," he said, "but it will at least save that unfortunate young woman whom you were talking of marrying, from making a fatal mistake."

Traske understood then, and his face was white with despair.

"You are going through with this?" he

gasped. "You are going to have me convicted?"

Mannister shook his head.

"Not necessarily," he said. "The evidence will probably be insufficient. But before the magistrates you certainly will go, and every one who pays a penny for a newspaper to-morrow, will know how you spent the evening."

* * * * *

Curiously enough, Mannister's words were prophetic. Traske was somewhat reluctantly discharged in the morning by a magistrate who obviously believed in his guilt. The young lady in the garden was hurried off to Switzerland by her aunt, and Mannister, taking a sheet of paper from his pocket, deliberately ruled a firm thick line through the first name.

CHAPTER III

THE ATRUSCAN SILVER MINE

HAMBLEDON and Polsover were walking arm in arm down the Strand. Their propinquity was not so much a matter of affection as of a mutual desire that their conversation should be unheard by passers-by.

"I tell you, Hambledon," Polsover was saying, "I don't like the idea of having Mannister in this at all. In fact I don't like being in anything with Mannister."

"Why not?" Hambledon asked.

Polsover looked around, as though even then he were afraid of being overheard.

"I don't trust him, Freddy," he said, under his breath.

"That's all very well," Hambledon objected, "but he's putting up his own money,

and if he upsets the apple-cart, he stands to lose as much as any of us."

Polsover nodded.

"That's reasonable enough," he said, "but, Freddy, I've always wanted to ask you. What did you think about that Traske affair?"

Hambledon took the cigar from his mouth for a moment and looked at it reflectively.

"Pol," he said, "I'll tell you something. Ben was on his last legs, hadn't money enough to buy a wedding ring, much more pay for a honeymoon. He was simply mad to get hold of the girl. He'd been to me twice that day, but I hadn't a tenner to spare. As a matter of fact you know what low water we've all been in. There was not a fifty pound note amongst us."

"You think, then," Polsover asked, "that he took the bracelet?"

"I do," Hambledon answered, "and if it hadn't been for Sophy De la Mere throttling the evidence, he'd have gone to prison for it. Didn't you think so?"

"I was not sure," Polsover answered

thoughtfully. "Somehow or other I found myself wondering whether Mannister had anything to do with it."

"What, with stealing the bracelet do you mean?" Hambledon asked.

"No, but with playing a little trick upon Traske! Mannister seems to have forgiven us in a way, but I tell you, Freddy, I can't trust him. I wish to Heaven he'd never come back, or that having come back, he'd have gone for us like a bull in a china shop. I don't understand the quiet way he took things. We robbed him, Freddy."

Hambledon shrugged his shoulders.

"True enough," he answered, "but Mannister's no fool. He'd have done the same in our place, and he doesn't know that we worked it with Sinclair to bolt with a certain lady. I grant you he'd never forgive that, and if I thought he knew it I'd go in fear and trembling. But he don't. It's simply the money, and I don't believe he's the sort to be vindictive about that."

"You may be right," Polsover said. "I hope you are. I can't help wishing, though,

that Mannister had never come back. I have an idea that we shall suffer for it. We've lost Traske already, gone to Canada. If any more misfortunes come, I tell you I shall step outside while he's round."

They turned into a side street, and pushing open a swing door a little way down, entered the private bar of a small hotel. Jacobs was sitting there, awaiting their coming.

"Jolly late, you chaps!" he grumbled. "I've been hanging about here for half an hour."

They ordered something to drink, and Jacobs leaned forward confidentially.

"I tell you," he said, "Mannister has got the part to perfection. When you chaps hear him you'll want to put every copper you've got yourselves into the great Atruscan mine."

"The question is," Polsover remarked, "whether our friend, Mr. Harold Cuthbertson, will be similarly impressed."

"You leave that to me," Jacobs replied. "What I want to know is, have you fellows had any luck?"

"'I tell you,' he said, 'Mannister has got the part to perfection.'"

"Not a bit!" Hambledon declared.

"None at all," Polsover said.

Jacobs set down his glass disconsolately.

"Then I do not see," he declared, "what we can do. Mannister will put up his lot, but only if we put up a similar amount. That's fair enough, for it takes a bit of pluck to put thousands of pounds into shares that aren't worth a snap of the fingers. Do you mean to say you fellows can do nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing!" Polsover declared, disconsolately.

Jacobs opened his mouth, as though he had a suggestion to make. Then apparently he changed his mind, and glanced toward the clock.

"Look here," he said, "we may be able to think of something. At any rate, Cuthbertson has asked us all to luncheon at the *Savoy* to-day at 1–30, and Mannister's going to tell him about the mine. It's worth coming to, whether we can work the thing or not. Let's go round there."

"I suppose we may as well," Hambledon said slowly, finishing his drink, and arranging

his tie in front of the mirror. "If we can't work this little affair, our friend Cuthbertson should turn out to be a profitable acquaintance in some way or another. A young man with a hundred thousand pounds coming to him in about three weeks time, should be worth cultivating."

"Or in other words, plucking," Polsover remarked drily, as they left the place.

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The luncheon party at the *Savoy* was certainly, so far as its immediate object went, a great success. Cuthbertson, a dissolute young boy within a few weeks of his majority, whose only guardians were a firm of lawyers, was the host, and Mannister sat at his right hand. On his left was Jacobs, who had found him in Paris. Polsover and Hambledon completed the little party. They were all men, with the exception of Cuthbertson himself, of a certain amount of presence, assisted perhaps a little too liberally by judicious tailoring. Mannister, however, with his bronzed face and unostentatious blue serge clothes, seemed somehow of a different order.

The boy at the head of the table listened to every word he said, eagerly. For the first part of luncheon, no mention was made of business, but with the arrival of the champagne, Hambledon lifted his glass.

"We must drink Mannister's health," he said, "and may he often come back from expeditions as satisfactory as this one. I only wish," he continued, "that it was as easy to make hundreds every day as he has made it possible for us to make thousands."

Mannister bowed ironically. The eyes of the boy by his side were fixed upon him eagerly.

"I say, Mr. Mannister," he began, in an undertone, "about this mine."

"What about it?" Mannister asked.

"When are you going to take your report in to the office?"

"To-morrow afternoon," Mannister answered. "No one paid me for going out, so I feel at liberty to do exactly as I please. That is why I am giving a few of my friends time to book up some of the shares before I disclose the truth."

"I suppose they'll go up a lot," Cuthbertson remarked.

Jacobs leaned across the table.

"To-day," he said, "the five pound shares can be bought for three pounds ten. The day after to-morrow they will stand at anything between fifteen and twenty pounds."

The boy's eyes glistened. They were not pleasant eyes, for young though he was, they were already dull and heavy looking. The light that shone in them was more the light of greed.

"Couldn't I," he demanded, "buy some?"

Jacobs shook his head. Hambledon began to talk to Polsover about something else, as though the subject scarcely interested him.

"I don't know," Jacobs said thoughtfully. "Between us we've scooped up nearly half of them. There are some more, of course, to be had, but it would mean cash down, and you might find that a little difficult, perhaps."

"Not a bit of it," Cuthbertson answered eagerly. "I know a money-lender who'd let me have twenty or thirty thousand to-

morrow. You see I'm of age in three weeks, and he knows the money's there waiting for me."

"It seems scarcely worth while," Mannister said with a yawn, "for you to come into the money-making market. You'll have plenty in a few weeks."

"One can't have too much," Cuthbertson answered, with a smile. "Of course, I'm coming in for a nice little pile, but nowadays it's pretty easy to get rid of it. I want to have a yacht if I can afford it, and I'll take all you fellows down the Mediterranean. About these shares, Jacobs. How many do you think you could get for me?"

"I have no idea whether I could get any," Jacobs answered. "How much money could you raise?"

"About thirty thousand," Cuthbertson answered.

"About's no good," Jacobs answered. "You'd better see your friend this afternoon, get to know exactly what you can raise, and how many of the shares you would like, and come down to my office and let me know.

Meantime I'll go round the city and see what can be done. But—you'll forgive me, Cuthbertson, I know," he added, leaning across the table, "it's a lot of money for you to make without any risk, and my time is worth something. I'd like to do this for you as a pal, but as you will be making something like a hundred thousand pounds out of it, I shall have to charge you my usual broker's commission. You won't mind that?"

The boy laughed carelessly.

"Not likely," he answered. "I don't want you to do it for nothing. I'll go and see old Lewis directly after luncheon. A hundred thousand pounds! Jove! I'll have the yacht after all! Waiter, pass the wine round, and get another magnum. Mannister, you are taking nothing."

Mannister smiled.

"Thank you," he said, "I never drink champagne in the middle of the day. I'm only taking one glass out of compliment to you and a somewhat important occasion."

Luncheon after that was not unduly protracted. Before half past three Cuthbertson

had hurried off to see his friend. The four men walked together into the bar smoking-room. They stood by the window looking down on the Embankment, out of earshot of any one else in the place.

"He'll get the money for certain," Jacobs said. "All that we need is to raise five thousand pounds for a few hours to buy these rotten shares. How are we going to do it? I have not five pounds in the bank."

Hambledon and Polsover shook their heads. Mannister shrugged his shoulders.

"It is impossible," he said quietly, "for me to raise a sixpence beyond what I have promised."

It was Mannister upon whom they had been relying. Their faces fell.

"It seems to me," Mannister remarked, "that Polsover is the man to arrange this. You have plenty of money in the hands of your firm, I suppose," he continued, "for the purposes of investment. Why can't you draw a cheque on your client's account? You can cover it to-morrow, and the investment is surely good enough."

Polsover shook his head.

"I daren't," he said. "If my partners found out they'd chuck me to-morrow. Besides, it's fraud."

Mannister laughed long and softly. He was leaning with his back against the wall and his arms folded, and there was something sinister about his mirth.

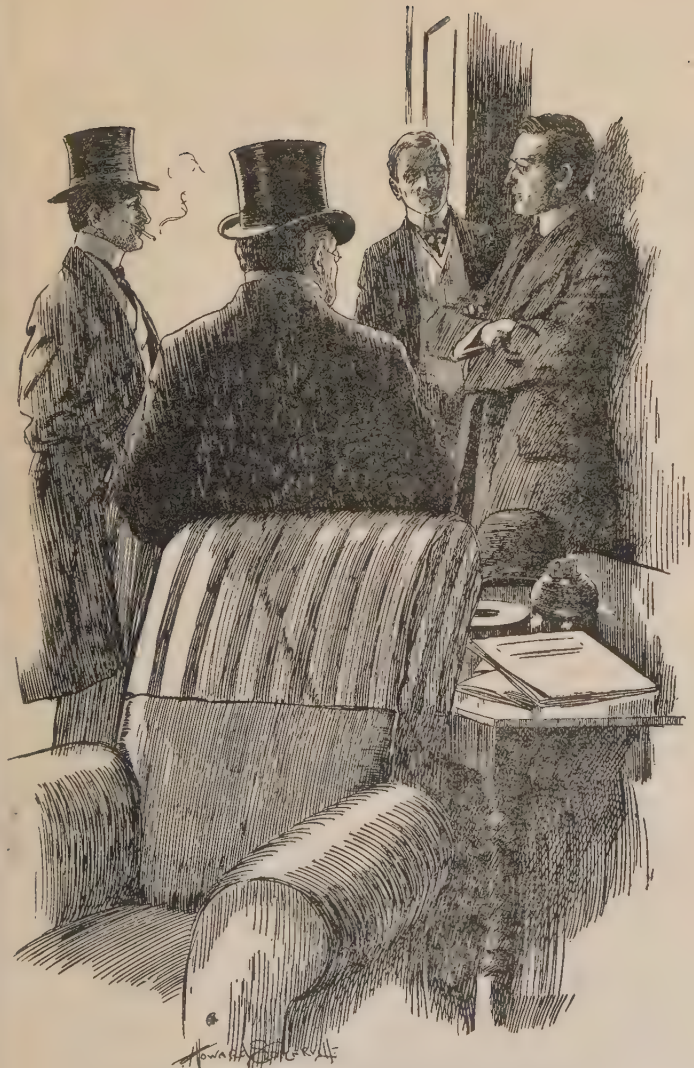
"Really," he said, "you fellows sometimes are funny. However, if the money can't be raised, the scheme is off, that's all. If I'd known there was going to be this difficulty, I might have spared my posing. To think that I've played the mining engineer for nothing!"

"The money must be found," Hambledon declared firmly. "This is too good a chance to send begging."

"Well, I'll leave you fellows to discuss it," Mannister said, picking up his hat.

Polsover laid his hand upon his arm.

"Don't go for a few minutes," he said. "I must think this over. I suppose, after all, it is a justifiable investment, provided, of course, he can raise the money."



"There was something sinister about his mirth."

Mannister shrugged his shoulders.

"You can place it beyond the limits of risk," he remarked. "First of all, wait till the boy comes back and shows you that he can raise the money. Then make him sign an agreement to buy the shares and pay for them to-morrow. And what on earth does it matter whose money you use to buy them with?"

"That's common sense," Hambledon declared.

"It sounds like it," Polsover admitted.

* * * * *

At about eight o'clock that evening, Cuthbertson had just completed a very careful toilette. In other words, he had succeeded in transforming himself into as close an imitation as possible of the young men whom he had seen about at the restaurants and theatres. His servant announced a visitor, and Mannister was shown into his rooms.

"I shan't detain you five minutes," the newcomer remarked, closing the door after him, "but I want you to spare me that if you will. It's rather an important matter."

"No difficulty about the shares, I hope?" Cuthbertson asked anxiously. "I have just seen Polsover. He told me he had secured twelve thousand, and I have arranged to give him the money for them to-morrow morning."

"It is about that," Mannister said, seating himself, "that I came to see you. You don't mind my smoking, do you?" he added, producing a cigarette case. "Thanks! Nice rooms you've got here."

"Aren't bad, are they," Cuthbertson said, "though I mean to do a good deal better when I come into my tin. I say, why won't you come and dine with me?" he added, a little eagerly. "We will go to Luigi's, or wherever you like. I am all alone this evening."

Mannister shook his head.

"Sorry," he said, "I can't, and perhaps you would not care to ask me when I have finished what I am going to say to you."

The boy looked at him anxiously.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Only this," Mannister answered. "You've been got hold of by a gang of sharks. Polsover

is one, Jacobs is one, Hambledon is one, and I am another. The Atruscan shares which Polsover is proposing to sell you to-morrow at three pounds fifteen, he gave about ten shillings for, and if you try to sell them any time within the next few months, you probably won't be able to realize more than half-a-crown. See ? "

Cuthbertson dropped into a chair.

" Why," he exclaimed, " I've signed a promise to take them over to-morrow at three pounds fifteen,—thirty thousand pounds worth ! "

" That is why I came to see you to-night," Mannister remarked. " You see, I am going back upon my pals. Never mind why. I have my own reasons. It may be out of consideration for you, or it may be for my private ends, but I give you my word of honour that the facts are as I tell them to you. Do you believe me ? "

Cuthbertson looked at him and groaned.

" I do," he said, " but I've signed the paper."

" You are a minor," Mannister said coolly,

"and they can't make you take the shares over. Take my advice. Catch the nine o'clock Continental train to Paris and stay there for a week or so. The thing will have blown over then. Leave a note for Polsover, and tell him you have changed your mind. That is all that is necessary."

"I'll do it," Cuthbertson declared, ringing the bell. "My fellow shall pack me some clothes at once. I say it's awfully good of you, Mr. Mannister, to help me out like this."

"You forget," Mannister reminded him coldly, "that I was one of the gang, only you see it didn't suit me to carry the thing right through. I am not going to tell you even now that Atruscan shares are worthless. They may be a great deal higher next week, or even the week after, but I do tell you that Polsover believes them to be absolutely worthless, and the five pound shares which he is selling you at three pounds fifteen, he bought, as I told you, at an average price of ten shillings, and if he had had a little more time, he could probably have bought

them at five. Of course, if you care to speculate——"

"I don't!" the boy interrupted sharply. "I am going to write a note to Polsover at once, and catch that train."

Mannister nodded, and strolled towards the door.

"I think," he said, "that you will do well to take this as a warning. The world isn't full of casual acquaintances who are anxious to stuff money into the pockets of strangers. Good-night!"

* * * * *

Mannister was sitting at breakfast the next morning in his rooms at Germain Street. He had finished his coffee and was preparing to light a cigarette, when his servant knocked at the door and announced a visitor.

"There is a gentleman of the name of Polsover here, sir," he announced. "He wishes to see you for a moment on urgent business. I told him that you did not care to be disturbed so early, but he seems very much upset."

Mannister nodded, and looked back to-toward the paper which he was reading.

"You can show him in, Morton," he said.

Polsover, white and scared, appeared almost at once. He scarcely waited until the door was closed before he flung an open letter before Mannister.

"Read that!" he exclaimed. "For God's sake, read that!"

Mannister laid down his paper with a little frown.

"I wish you would learn to cultivate a little more self-restraint, my young friend," he said. "Even the appearance of hurry at this hour of the morning disturbs my digestion."

"D——n your digestion!" Polsover cried, holding down the letter with trembling fore-finger. "Read it! See what a mess we are in!"

Mannister adjusted his eyeglass and read the letter carefully. It consisted only of a few hasty lines, written in Cuthbertson's almost illegible scrawl.

"Dear Sir," it began, "I met a friend this

"'Read it! See what a mess we are in.'"

evening who gave me a very bad account of the Atruscan mine, and it seems to me that you may have been mistaken in your estimate of the value of those shares. In any case, I have decided not to have anything to do with them, which kindly note. I am going away for a few days to-night, and hope you will not be put to any inconvenience in the matter. Yours faithfully, Harold Cuthbertson."

Mannister folded the letter up and handed it back to Polsover.

"That's awkward," he remarked nonchalantly.

"Awkward!" Polsover gasped. "Do you know that I have used six thousand pounds of the office money to buy those shares! That young blackguard swore that I should have the money by ten o'clock this morning."

"You ought not to have lost sight of him," Mannister said calmly. "No doubt he's met some one who has given him an idea of the truth. The only thing you can do is to put them back upon the market this morning, and stand the loss."

Polsover was shaking from head to foot.

"Put them on the market!" he faltered. "Why, it would take days to sell them to realize any price at all, and even then the margin of loss would be far and away greater than any I could afford. I gave shillings a share more for some of the lots, because I wanted them quick, and I know very well there isn't a lot I bought I could get rid of again at anything like the price. If I can't replace the money I borrowed by eleven o'clock this morning, I'm done. Can you do anything, Mannister?"

Mannister shook his head.

"Not I," he answered. "You ought to have some money between you. You've had some lucky hauls within the last few years."

There was a moment's silence. A swift suspicion flashed into Polsover's mind. He bent forward, looking into Mannister's face. Was this a trap into which he had fallen? But Mannister's expression told him nothing. Calm and as imperturbable as ever, his whole

attention seemed to be absorbed in the selection of a fresh cigarette.

"We had some good hauls," Polsover groaned, "but we had some thundering bad luck too. You can't help me, Mannister?"

"I can't," Mannister answered. "The only thing I can do is this. If you see that you absolutely can't pull through, I'll give you a thousand pounds for the shares, and take my chance of getting rid of them some way or other. It will be enough to give you a fresh start abroad. You know very well that if you throw these shares on the market this morning, they won't fetch a shilling apiece."

"How long shall you be here?" Polsover asked.

"I'll stay in until eleven," Mannister answered, "and I'll send to the bank for the money."

"If I can't pull through without, I'll be back," Polsover answered, snatching up his hat.

Mannister nodded, and returned to his newspaper.

* * * * *

At twenty minutes to eleven Polsover was back again. He was wearing a long travelling coat and a pair of motor spectacles.

"I'll take your thousand, Mannister," he said. "You were right. I can't realize a shilling on the shares, and I can't come anywhere near finding the money I borrowed. It will be all out in less than an hour. I am going to motor down to Southampton. You've got the money? Here are the shares."

He threw some scrip on the table, and Mannister counted out Bank of England notes and gold, a thousand pounds."

"Give me a drink," Polsover gasped. "I haven't had a mouthful to-day, and I'm nearly done."

Mannister mixed him a brandy and soda and filled his pocket with biscuits. Polsover held out his hand as he turned away, but Mannister affected not to see it.

"Better luck to you!" he said drily. "And good-bye!"

Polsover hurried away, and Mannister watched him from the window jump into the motor-car which was waiting below. Then

he turned back into the room and drew a little folded paper from his breast coat pocket. With steady fingers he drew a firm straight line through the second name upon the list.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEFEAT OF RUNDERMERE

MANNISTER became aware, some few weeks after the disappearance of Polsover, of a certain restraint in the demeanour of both Hambledon and Jacobs towards himself. They came less often to Luigi's, and though they welcomed him when they did meet there or elsewhere, he had a very shrewd suspicion that so far as they were able they were avoiding him. One day he taxed them with it, and Hambledon, with somewhat rare candour, admitted the fact.

"It isn't that I'm particularly superstitious, Mannister," he declared, "but ever since your return things have gone wrong with us. Poor Ben has been obliged to go to Canada over that affair of the bracelet, and they say that he's drinking like a fish there.

And Polsover we've lost altogether. Both these things happened since you came back to us, and within a few weeks of one another."

"You don't suspect——" Mannister began calmly.

"Suspect! My dear fellow, how can you even hint at such a thing!" Hambledon declared, looking away. "Of course it is a pure coincidence, but you must admit that you have not proved altogether a mascot to us. In any case we are going quiet just now. No one seems to have any money, and there is nothing doing in the city. I dare say something will turn up a little later on that we can have a little plunge at. See you soon again, I hope," and Hambledon hurried off.

Mannister turned away with a smile, and going to his rooms, ordered his servant to pack his clothes.

"We are going down into the country, Morton," he said. "We may be away for two or three months. Very likely I shall hunt, so you had better go through my things and see what I want."

"Very good, sir," the man answered. "About when shall we be leaving?"

"The day after to-morrow," Mannister answered. "If I need fresh riding things, I can come up later and have them tried on. I am going round now to look at some horses."

* * * * *

"Who was the new man out on the big bay, Jack?" one of his intimates asked the master of the North Westshire hounds, as they rode home one evening.

"No idea," the Honourable Jack Dunster answered, "but he looks like a thundering good sort. I never saw a man sit a horse better, and he took his fences like a professional steeplechase rider. Sent us a thumping good cheque, too, and a very civil note. I shall look him up to-morrow or the next day."

"What was his name?" the other man asked.

"Mannister, I think. Something like that, anyhow," the Honourable Jack replied.

"Good name," his friend remarked. "I like the look of the fellow, too. If you get on

with him I shall look him up myself. He looks as though he could shoot, and we're awfully short of guns this year."

They turned round at the sound of a horse's hoofs on the bridle path behind.

"Talk of the devil!" the Honourable Jack remarked. 'We'll wait for him if you dont mind."

Mannister rode up to them and raised his hat in answer to the master's greeting.

"I was going to look you up, Mr. Mannister," the Honourable Jack said pleasantly. "I hope you'll have a good time down here with us. You had a fairly good start to-day, I think."

"I have had a capital day," Mannister answered, "and I am quite sure one can get all the sport one wants down here."

"You have not hunted with us before, I believe?" the master asked.

"I have scarcely ever been in the county before," Mannister answered. "I am a colonial, although I have relatives in England."

"This is my friend Lashmore, Mr. Man-

nister," the Honourable Jack said, introducing his companion. "Lord Lashmore is one of our oldest supporters."

"I knew some people of your name up in the north," his Lordship remarked, nodding to Mannister.

"My uncle, I expect," Mannister answered, "Sir George Mannister. His place is in Yorkshire, near Skipton."

"I have dined there once or twice," Lashmore answered. "Jolly good sportsman he is. Hope to have the pleasure of looking you up in a day or two, Mr. Mannister."

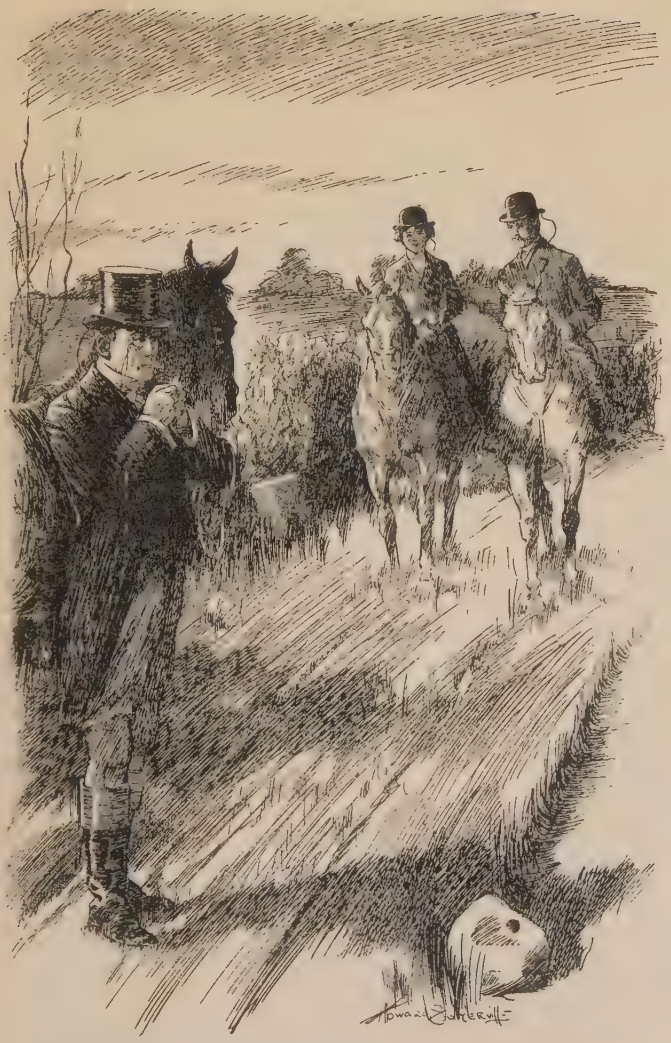
"I shall be very pleased," Mannister answered civilly. "I expect to be here for at least six weeks."

They reached some cross-roads where their ways parted.

"You won't come along and have a drink?" the Honourable Jack asked. "It's barely half a mile out of your way."

"Not to-night, thanks," Mannister answered. "I'm afraid my mare's had about enough."

They parted with civil good-nights, but



"Dismounting, took out a cigarette case and began striking matches."

Mannister did not at once pursue his way to the village. Instead he turned back and rode slowly along the way by which he had come. When at last he was sure that the man and the girl whom he had passed some time before were coming along, he paused, and dismounting took out a cigarette case and began striking matches. As they passed him he looked up, and a little smile parted his lips. He had not been mistaken, then. He mounted his horse and rode slowly after them.

"Excuse me," he said, as he caught them up, "surely this is Mr. Philip Rundermere?"

The man addressed turned quickly round. He was tall and dark, of almost olive complexion in fact, with deep-set black eyes, and somewhat worn face. It was obvious that he recognized Mannister, and it was also obvious that the recognition was a shock to him.

"Good God!" he muttered, under his breath. "Why, is that you, Mannister?" he added, with a determined attempt to regain his self-possession.

"Have I changed so much?" Mannister answered, smiling. "I hope you will excuse me for making myself known so unceremoniously," he added, raising his hat and bowing to the girl who rode by Rundermere's side, "but it is several years since I saw my friend here."

Rundermere was forced to introduce Miss Dunster, but it was obvious that he did so under compulsion. Mannister, however, whose manners when he chose were as near perfection as possible, affected not to notice his friend's coldness.

"I have just had the pleasure of meeting your father, Miss Dunster," he said. "In fact, I only left him a few minutes ago. Are you staying in these parts, Rundermere?"

"I am staying at the *White Hart* for a week or so," Rundermere answered.

"In that case," Mannister answered, "we shall meet again, for I am at the *George*, exactly opposite. If you will allow me, Miss Dunster, I will wish you good-evening. My mare is still fresh enough to manage a canter home, I think."

He raised his hat and passed on ahead. The girl looked after him admiringly.

"What a very handsome man your friend is, Mr. Rundermere," she said, "and how beautifully he rides! You did not seem particularly pleased to see him."

Rundermere stooped down and looked into her face.

"Do you suppose," he said softly, "that I should welcome any one under the circumstances?"

* * * * *

Mannister had the knack of making his bachelor quarters seem always attractive. He dined alone and simply, but the silver and the table linen he had brought with him from London, and he was the best customer the little florist in the village had had for some time. The book-shelves of the quaintly furnished sitting-room, too, were filled with his own books, and the masculine trifles by which he was surrounded were all the best of their sort. Rundermere, who was announced just as he was finishing dinner, looked around him and shrugged his shoulders.

"You always had the knack of making yourself comfortable, Mannister," he remarked. "My quarters seem bare enough after yours. May I sit down for a few moments?"

"By all means," Mannister answered calmly. "Will you drink port or whiskey and soda?"

"Neither, thanks, just now," Rundermere answered. "I want to know what the devil you are doing down here?"

Mannister smiled gently.

"Well," he said, "I like candour. Since you ask me I will tell you. I am down here to hunt. Our friends in London did not seem particularly well disposed towards me, and I was bored. I looked up a place where I thought that I could be quiet, and where I should not be likely to meet any one I knew. After all, though, ours is a very small country."

Rundermere drew a little breath of relief.

"You mean this?" he asked.

Mannister raised his eyebrows.

"My dear fellow," he said, "what other reason upon the earth would bring me to a benighted region like this?"

Rundermere hesitated for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders. After all, that had been a wild suspicion of his. There was not one chance in twenty that Mannister had even an idea how falsely he had been dealt with by those men whom he had called his friends. He helped himself to a glass of port, and they talked for a few minutes of the day's run.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," Mannister invited him. "I go to bed early, but there is time for a pipe at any rate."

Rundermere excused himself.

"I am going up to the Hall for some bridge," he said. "I only looked in to see you on the way. Do you play, by-the-bye?"

Mannister shook his head.

"Bridge came to the front," he remarked, "whilst I was playing another sort of game. I have never cared to learn it. Cards don't interest me much, except an occasional gamble. We hunt to-morrow, I suppose?"

"Quite close here," Rundermere answered. "Very good country, too. I should think we ought to have a good day."

"By-the-bye," Mannister asked, "is that young lady you were riding with Mr. Dunster's only daughter?"

Rundermere looked him in the face steadily.

"Yes!" he answered. "Why?"

"Nothing," Mannister answered calmly, "only I have seen you with her once or twice, yesterday and to-day. She's very pretty, but very young, isn't she?"

"She's nineteen," Rundermere answered, and there was a shade of challenge in his tone.

"So old?" Mannister remarked, turning away. "She doesn't look it. Well, don't let me keep you from your bridge, Rundermere. Good luck to you!"

"Good-night!" Rundermere answered. "I need to have good luck. They play bridge high round here."

Mannister turned his easy-chair to the fire, and sat for nearly half an hour with his coffee untasted and his pipe unlit. Somehow he could not get the child's face out of his mind, and he was uncomfortably conscious of a feeling of strong repulsion when he found

himself associating her in any way with the man who had just left the room. The frown on his face grew deeper as he sat there.

"What the devil business is it of mine?" he muttered at last, turning and striking a match with unnecessary vigour. "Rundermere is a blackguard through and through, but if the child believes in him it's her misfortune, not mine. I wonder how far he means to go."

* * * * *

Mannister became in his way a distinctly popular member of the North Westshire Hunt. He rode straight, and took a line of his own. He was a fine horseman, and though he showed little inclination to make friends, he was still always civil, and the women declared his manners were perfection. The only person whose society he in any way seemed to seek was May Dunster, the girl whom he had met riding home with Rundermere on his first day out. Twice he had given her a lead across country, and on each occasion he had ridden home with her afterwards. On the second occasion Rundermere, whose

horses were not of the first class, and who was riding home alone, met him on his way back from the Hall, and rode moodily up to his side.

"Look here, Mannister," he said, "I do not see what the devil you want to try and spoil my game for!"

Mannister turned in his saddle and regarded his companion with gently upraised eyebrows.

"Are you in earnest, Rundermere?" he asked.

"Of course I am," Rundermere answered. "She's a dear little girl, got lots of money, and was getting quite fond of me before you came."

Mannister continued to regard his companion with an air of mild wonder.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Rundermere?" he asked. "Do you realize that you are forty-four or forty-five years old, that your record is about as black as a decently born Englishman's can be, that you have never gone straight at any time in your life, even with women? You realize these things,

and yet you talk of being in earnest with a poor little child like this!"

Rundermere's dark face was black with passion.

"D——n you, Mannister!" he said. "You go too far. A man has to settle down some time, and many worse than I have done it. Your own record isn't altogether spotless, is it? I should like to know what has become of Sinclair!"

Mannister looked steadily between his horse's ears.

"Rundermere," he said, "there are two names which I do not permit any man to mention in my presence. One is Sinclair's, the other a lady's. I only wish to warn you that if you should forget this little whim of mine, your lips will not be in a condition for use for a considerable time."

Rundermere rode on in savage silence, which remained unbroken until they reached the outskirts of the village. Then he turned once more to his companion.

"Look here, Mannister," he said, "why can't you go your way and let me go mine?

I don't wish to interfere with you, and I can't see that I'm doing you any harm."

Mannister laughed enigmatically as he turned away into the covered yard of his inn.

"I make no bargains with you, Rundermere," he said. "I act as it pleases me."

On his table Mannister found a note from the Hall, asking him to dine that night. He stood for several minutes holding it in his hand, apparently undecided. Then, with a little shrug of the shoulders, he dashed off a hasty affirmative. This was the fourth invitation he had received, only one of which he had accepted. This one he would have declined but for some little gossip of the hunting field which had come to his ears during the day's run. There had been some very high play at the Hall during the last few nights, and Rundermere had been in luck. Rundermere and a friend of his had been partners, and won a record rubber. Mannister wondered, as he tied his white tie, who that friend might be. He had caught a glimpse of him in the hunting field and recognized his calibre instinctively. He felt

himself curious as he climbed into his dog-cart and drove off to Dunster Hall, to know whether Rundermere and his friend would be there that night.

The dinner-party at the Hall that evening was quite a small one. Besides himself and a sister of Mr. Dunster's, there were only Lord Lashmore, Rundermere, and his friend Captain Harrison, as guests. Captain Harrison was a colourless-looking man, with faint sandy moustache, and an exceedingly quiet manner. He spoke to scarcely any one during dinner-time, and took little, if any wine.

"One of the finest bridge players I ever saw," his host said in an undertone to Mannister, as they drew closer together after the women had left. "His finesses are positive inspirations. Rundermere isn't bad himself, but his friend knocks spots off him. They had the devil's own luck last night too, drew together almost every rubber."

Mannister was interested, and would have liked to prolong the conversation, but Rundermere intervened with an inquiry about some two-year-olds, which brought their host

on to one of his favourite subjects. Mannister, hearing music in the hall, excused himself presently, and strolled out to where May Dunster was playing a small organ. She jumped up directly she saw him.

"Do come and look at our new fountain, Mr. Mannister," she said. "We have set it going to-day for the first time."

He followed her into the conservatory and duly admired the fountain.

"Of course," she said, laying her hand upon his arm, "I did not bring you here to look at it. You can guess that, can't you?"

He nodded.

"I had an idea," he remarked, "that you had something to say to me."

She looked at him, standing up against the background of palm trees, tall, distinguished, with hard bronzed face, a little lined, but showing as yet no sign of middle age. Was it indeed a cruel face, she wondered, remembering what some one had remarked a few days before. She sighed as she looked away. At any rate there was very little sentiment there. Even the not infrequent smile was a thing which had little to do with mirth.

"I want to ask you something about Mr. Rundermere," she said. "He is a friend of yours, is he not?"

A very slight frown appeared on Mannister's face as he looked down into her eyes.

"I could not go so far as to admit that," he said. "I have very few friends. Rundermere was an acquaintance of mine some years ago."

"You do not like him!" she exclaimed.

"I do not," he answered calmly. "Do you?"

"I wish I could tell you that!" she exclaimed, looking up at him, perplexed—a little distressed. "Sometimes I think I like him very much, sometimes I do not trust him at all, sometimes I hate him, sometimes I feel that it would be very easy to——"

"To what?" he asked.

"To do what he wants me to do," she said softly, "to care for him."

"Am I right," Mannister said, leaning a little toward her, "in assuming that you want my advice?"

"Please," she asked.

"Look at me, child," he said.

She looked, and it seemed to her that it was a different man whose face was bent towards hers. There was something softer and kinder in the eyes, some lightening of the cold firm lines of his mouth. He seemed suddenly so much nearer to her.

"Yes?" she whispered.

"Do I look like a truthful person?" he asked. "Stop a minute, let me tell you this. I have committed most crimes which are possible to a selfish man who loves his liberty, but I have never lied to a woman. Do you believe me?"

Her hands rested upon his very softly. It needed only a movement on his part to turn their touch into a caress.

"You know that I do," she murmured.

"Then believe me when I tell you that there is no man upon this earth less fit to be your husband than Philip Rundermere. He has committed a sin in daring to ask you such a thing, a sin for which he will have to answer. Promise me that you will not think of him in that way any more."

"Her whisper was so faint it scarcely reached his ear."

Her head dropped almost to her hands. Her whisper was so faint that it scarcely reached his ear.

"I promise," she murmured.

He drew his hands gently away.

"Little girl," he said softly, "you are very young, and you have seen very little indeed of the world, but after you have lived a few years longer, you will know that it is not middle-aged men whose lives lie behind them, like Rundermere and myself, who should dare to ask these things of you. Keep that tender little heart of yours safe until the right time comes. Very soon you will understand what I mean."

Almost without her knowing it he slipped away.

* * * * *

Mannister strolled into the library, where the other four men were already seated at the bridge table. His host looked up as he entered.

"Come and cut in, Mannister," he said. "We have not started yet."

Mannister shook his head.

"Thanks," he said, "it's an ignoble confession to make, but I do not play bridge. I will smoke if I may, and look at the *Field*."

The Honourable Jack, having done his duty towards his guest, was much too interested in the game to think further about him for the present. He and Lord Lashmore were once more partners against Rundermere and Harrison, and the fortunes of the game seemed still inclined toward the visitors. Mannister read an article in the *Field* carefully through, word by word, before he raised his eyes. During that time Rundermere had three times turned round in his chair to watch him, and noted the fact that he was apparently absorbed in his paper. When he had finished the article, however, Mannister raised his head, and from behind the cover of the journal which he held, he devoted his entire attention upon the game which the four men were playing. After a while he changed his position, and throwing down the *Field*, crossed the room with a yawn, and stood before a picture at the other side of the card table. His host glanced towards

him with a momentary impulse of neglected hospitality.

"Sure you would not like to come in, Mannister?" he asked. "I'm afraid it is awfully slow for you."

"I would not come in for worlds," Mannister answered. "Don't bother about entertaining me. I'm going round the room looking at your prints now. Rather a hobby of mine, prints."

Another quarter of an hour passed. Then Mannister went to a writing table and wrote a few sentences upon a sheet of notepaper. He thrust it into his waistcoat pocket, and lighting another cigarette, leaned his elbow upon the mantelpiece, and seemed to be watching the game with languid interest. When it was Dunster's turn to be dummy, he called him softly over.

"I wish," he said, "you'd explain the meaning of this print to me."

Dunster followed him over to the further corner of the room. Mannister took the paper from his waistcoat pocket and smoothed it out.

"Mr. Dunster," he said, "I am sorry to say that you and Lord Lashmore are being robbed by a pair of card sharpers. Don't!" he added sharply, as Dunster was about to betray his astonishment by an angry exclamation.

"Are you in earnest, Mr. Mannister?" his host asked.

"Absolute and sober earnest," Mannister replied, "and you can prove it for yourself if you will. Am I not right in supposing that Captain Harrison and Rundermere have drawn together as partners nearly every rubber that has been played?"

"That is so," Mr. Dunster admitted stiffly, "but we have always cut."

"Cutting," Mannister said, "is a ridiculously easy matter for an expert like Rundermere's friend. Of course, I have not had time to make out the complete code, but there are signals which pass between them to determine the declarations, and also asking for a lead. You see there are two codes for the declarations. In the first Harrison's foot is pressed against his partner's, once for spades,

twice for clubs, three times for diamonds, four times for hearts, and a quick tap for no trumps. That in itself is absolutely easy in the case of unsuspicious opponents. But in case that fails, watch their way of holding their cards. The five fingers are on the last five cards, or some are pushed together to make the code. It is as simple as ABC. Now watch. Your partner is playing a losing trick. It will be Rundermere's lead directly. Now watch Harrison's fingers."

Rundermere took the trick and hesitated. Harrison glanced through his cards, and one of his fingers moved slightly. His first finger was against the third card from the end in his hand.

"Rundermere will lead a diamond," Mannister whispered, and almost as he spoke Rundermere led a small card from that suit.

Dunster had the look of a man who had seen a ghost.

"Nothing of this sort," he said, "has ever taken place in my house. Mannister, don't you think there is a chance that you are mistaken?"

Mannister shook his head.

"Excuse yourself for a moment," he said, "and read that code through in the next room. It is not complete, of course. There are variations as to a high or low card which I cannot quite follow. But if you watch for the next half-hour, you will see enough to convince you or any one."

Dunster excused himself for a moment, and when he came back he went straight to the sideboard and poured himself out a brandy and soda.

"Lost two tricks did we, partner?" he said. "I thought my hand was a fair one, too."

"Every finesse went against us," Lashmore said gloomily, "and every card in their hands seemed to make."

Dunster resumed his seat and the game progressed. Mannister reclined in an easy-chair, the *Field* still before him, but his eyes half closed. Then suddenly Dunster rose to his feet, and laid his cards face downwards on the table.

"Gentlemen," he said calmly, "I regret that this game cannot go on."

"'Gentlemen,' he said calmly, 'I regret that this game cannot go on'"

Lashmore looked at him in blank amazement. Rundermere was suddenly as pale as death, and his eyes had the wild stare of a man who is stricken by a sudden terror.

"What the devil do you mean, Dunster?" Lashmore asked.

"Mr. Rundermere and Captain Harrison," Dunster said calmly, "know very well what I mean. No money, I believe, has changed hands to-night. The records of this game will be destroyed. Mr. Rundermere, I am ringing for your dog-cart. You will find it convenient, I trust, to finish your season's hunting elsewhere."

Rundermere rose to his feet a little unsteadily. For a moment he seemed about to fight, but he looked past Dunster's determined face to where Mannister lolled in his easy-chair with a mocking smile upon his lips. He left the room, and Harrison followed his cue. Dunster turned towards Mannister and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Mannister," he said, "I suppose I ought to thank you. You had to tell me, of course,

but I would not have had this happen for a thousand pounds."

Mannister laughed softly as he made his way to the writing-table.

"I see," he said, "that you have some ink here. Allow me!"

He took a pen from the rack and a paper from his pocket. Then with a little sigh of satisfaction he drew a straight firm line through the third name on the list.

CHAPTER V

THE END OF JOHN DYKES—BURGLAR

MANNISTER brought his brief stay amongst the North Westshire's to a close within the next few days. Harrison and Rundermere had disappeared as though from the face of the earth, but Dunster, although he was still civil and tried to show his gratitude, was obviously not at his ease with the man who had exposed the character of his guests, and May's white face and pathetic eyes seemed to haunt him wherever he went. He became conscious very soon that she was taking every opportunity to throw herself in his way, and with a little shrug of the shoulders one night he ordered his man to pack his dressing-case, and was driven away to catch the last train to London, leaving his horses to be sold, and the remainder of

his effects brought up to him later on. He saw little of his old associates during his first few days in town, but he met Jacobs one afternoon, and talked to him idly for a few minutes. The conversation, which was somewhat one-sided, amused Mannister. Jacobs was unable to stand still or look him in the face. He was overcome with the nervousness which is akin to fear.

"By-the-bye," the latter said, "I heard yesterday that Sophy De la Mere was about to be married."

Mannister was quietly interested.

"To whom?" he asked.

"I have forgotten the name," Jacobs said, "but it's some boy or other, about half her age. They are down at Brighton together now."

Mannister smiled, and that night he dined at the *Metropôle* at Brighton. After a glance through the visitors' register, he removed his portmanteau to a more select and smaller place, further down the sea-front. The first person he saw after he had engaged his room was the lady whose name had been

mentioned to him that morning. She was crossing the hall alone, and he watched her for a few moments critically. She was still a handsome woman, with a figure which seemed well enough, however much it may have owed to the corsetière. Her features had always been good, and her long eyes, almond shaped, and of a peculiar shade of brown, were as attractive as ever. Yes, she was a dangerous woman still, especially to a boy. She did not pretend to show any pleasure at seeing him there. She stopped short for a moment with a little start of surprise. Then she came slowly on towards him.

"My dear Mrs. De la Mere," he said, bowing over her hand, "I fear that for once in my life, at any rate, you are not glad to see me. Tell me what I have done that you should look at me as though I were an unwelcome ghost."

She laughed naturally enough. She had the pluck of a regiment of men, and it was not often that her nerve failed her.

"There are times, you know," she said,

" when one does not want to see even one's best friends, and I am not sure," she added, more slowly, " whether I should ever dare to reckon you amongst my best friends."

" Dear lady," he said, looking at her with a peculiar light in his eyes, " exactly how much of friendship have you deserved of me ? "

" Men do not pay women according to their deserts," she answered. " It is your province to forgive, to make the least of injuries, to remember that we scarcely meet as equal foes."

He smiled.

" Your tongue," he remarked, " is as subtle as ever. If you were an advocate, you would steal justice from the jury as you steal the hearts of men to-day. Tell me, by-the-bye, why you are not pleased to see me at Brighton."

" A few months ago," she murmured, " it became necessary, in our joint interests, that you should confide in me a very little. It was that little affair of Traske and the bracelet, you remember. I gathered then that there were several others beside Traske upon your black list.'

"She left him with her head in the air."

"You yourself, my dear lady, I am sorry to say," he said, smiling.

"Ah, well!" she declared, "I like this better. It is open war, then. Let it be so. I prefer it. Remember, then, that I do not know you, that if you speak to me again I shall treat you as any other impertinent person who is guilty of presumption."

She left him with her head in the air, and a little flutter of laces and perfume, her own peculiar perfume, familiar to him for many years. He shrugged his shoulders and turned into the smoking-room, not altogether too pleased. Open war made the game more difficult.

The smoke-room he discovered was in its way somewhat unique. It was Oriental in design and architecture, and a number of small partitions ran round the room, in which were lounges and small three-legged tables. Mannister entered one, and calling a waiter, ordered a whiskey and soda and the evening paper. He had scarcely begun to read, however, when he was interrupted by a distinct snore from the next partition. He leaned

round the corner and looked to see from whom the sound came. Then he picked up his paper and whiskey and soda, and quietly changed his place into the next recess. On the lounge immediately in front of him, a man was stretched. He was half asleep and half drunk. His collar had given way, his tie and waistcoat were stained with wine. In front of him was an empty champagne bottle and a partially smoked cigar. Mannister studied him for several moments and then called for a waiter.

"Do you allow people in this condition to lie about the smoke-room of the hotel?" he asked.

The waiter was apologetic.

"The gentleman is very well known here, sir," he said, "or we should have had him turned out. I thought as there was no one else in the room we might let him stay and sleep it off. I have not often seen him as bad as this, sir, but he is never quarrelsome. He will be all right when he wakes up!"

"You say that he is well known down

here," Mannister remarked. "Do you mean that he lives in Brighton?"

"He lives at this hotel most of his time," the waiter answered, "although he goes up to London most days."

"I think," Mannister said, regarding the sleeping man, "that I know him by sight. Is his name John Dykes?"

"That is it, sir," the waiter assented, "Mr. John Dykes. I have heard that he is a partner in a book-making firm."

Mannister nodded.

"All right," he said, "don't disturb him. If he wakes up while I am here, I will see that he does not make himself objectionable."

The waiter hurried away to serve some newcomers, and Mannister divided his attention between the paper which he held and the features of the man who lay on the couch before him. Certainly there was nothing in the appearance of Mr. John Dykes to appeal to the lover of the beautiful. He was short and thick-set. His round face was innocent of beard or moustache, but his complexion was of a grey, unhealthy colour, and his teeth

were far from perfect. His clothes were expensive, but they hung about him badly. In sleep, at any rate, his appearance was almost repulsive.

"Mr. John Dykes," Mannister said slowly to himself, "I wonder what you are doing in Brighton. You have not improved, Johnnie," he added, looking him over with quiet disgust. "You were never much to look at, but you've gone backwards, if anything, a little. I think I'd like to have a chat with you."

He leaned over and struck the sleeping man upon the shoulder. Dykes sat up suddenly and stared at Mannister, his mouth open in bewildered surprise.

"Eh! Eh what?" he exclaimed. "By Heavens, it's Mannister! Where have I got to?"

He looked round the place, and apparently remembered.

"I must have been to sleep," he muttered, looking at the empty bottle. "What a throat I've got! Do you mind touching the bell?"

Then he apparently seemed to suddenly remember who his neighbour was, and he looked at him with astonishment mingled with fear.

"Mannister!" he muttered. "Why, man, I thought—we thought——"

"You thought I was never likely to return to England again," Mannister continued calmly. "It was just a little miscalculation, that's all. I am here, as you see. I have seen something of most of the others, but I was wondering what had become of you. I think it was Polsover who told me that you'd been doing pretty well, or was it Hambledon? No, it must have been Hambledon."

The man was sitting up now. He called for a waiter and ordered a brandy and soda.

"So you're back again," he said, "and in with the old crowd, eh?"

"Precisely," Mannister assented. "I am in with the old crowd. My welcome back, I must confess, was not exactly boisterous; still I think that I am making my presence felt."

Dykes nodded heavily.

"I suppose," he said, "that you've come down instead of that young blackguard Jacobs."

Mannister did not hesitate for a moment.

"Exactly," he replied. "They thought it was better that I should come. Jacobs is rather well known in Brighton."

"If you'd come punctually," John Dykes grumbled, "you'd have saved my making a bit of a fool of myself. I began to think that I must have made a mistake, and that it was to-morrow, not to-day."

"I am sorry," Mannister said. "The appointment was for to-day, but I went in error to the wrong hotel. Suppose you go in and have a wash, and then drink that brandy and soda. We might get on with our business then."

John Dykes rose, and lumbered heavily across the room. Mannister called him back.

"Look here," he said, "go and put a clean collar on, and brush yourself up. You're not fit to be about the place like that."

"All right," Dykes grumbled, and stumbled

toward the door. Mannister returned to his seat with a smile. He still had some of his old power over these men, the power which seems to belong to some as a natural gift. He sat down, and lighting a cigarette, looked thoughtfully up toward the ceiling. Dykes was down here on business of some sort, and was waiting for Jacobs. His sudden idea of taking Jacobs' place had been accepted Was it possible that remaining in absolute ignorance of whatever this particular piece of business might be, he could play Jacobs' part until he had learnt whether it was of sufficient importance to make his interference worth while ? At any rate he was running no risk, and as regards his first mission to Brighton, he had already arrived at a cul-de-sac. It was scarcely likely that he would be able to bluff Dykes into telling him anything, if the matter was one really of importance. On the other hand, the man was still in a stupid state, and the experiment would at any rate cost nothing.

Dykes returned, heavy-eyed and leaden-

cheeked, but looking a little tidier, and inclined to be as amiable as he knew how. He drank the second brandy and soda, which Mannister considerately ordered for him, at a gulp.

"I say," he remarked, "there is no need to mention this." He pointed to the empty bottle. "Eh?"

Mannister assented with a little nod of the head

"All right," he said, "I don't want to make mischief. By the by, Hambledon thought you'd better just go over this matter again to me. There was not time for him to explain much, and as you know, I've only just come back."

Dykes looked for a moment a trifle surprised.

"I supposed you knew all about it," he said, looking at Mannister thoughtfully.

"Of course I do," Mannister answered, "but I didn't find Hambledon very clear upon some of the points. I should like to hear it from you in your own words. You have a knack of putting these things clearly."

Dykes called the waiter.

"I can't talk unless I drink," he said. "I've got a throat like a brick kiln. Thank Heavens you aren't Hambledon! He'd shut me off liquor for a week, and at the end of that time I should not have the nerve of a kitten."

"Moderation," Mannister said, "is best for you, I am sure. We will say one more brandy and soda."

"It's in this way," Dykes said, leaning across the table after a careful glance around "You know very well that although all of us run a bit close to the edge now and then, we're not a gang of thieves, and we do not care about getting on the wrong side of the law. This little affair comes perilously near it which is why Hambledon and the others have kept me waiting here before they decided whether to go on or not. I take it from your wanting to hear the whole thing from me, that they've left it with you to decide. Well, here goes. It was Rundermere," John Dykes continued, leaning over the table, and speaking in a hoarse, indistinct whisper, "who

first tumbled to the thing. He was hunting up in Westshire, and got to know the girl and her father. Her father was the master of a small pack of hounds there, and Phil got on visiting terms with them. What his game was I don't know, and it don't particularly concern us, but the girl and he were evidently pretty thick. What's wrong, eh ? " he broke off a little abruptly. " You look as though you were seeing things."

" Nothing is wrong," Mannister said calmly, " I can assure you I was listening intently. Of course you are speaking now of the Honourable Jack Dunster and his daughter."

John Dykes nodded.

" I see," he remarked, " that you have a good memory for names. Phil and the young woman must have got pretty thick, for she told him all about her going to Court this first drawing-room, and her coming to Brighton first to stay with her aunt. Every one in the neighbourhood knew about her jewels, but again it was she who told him that she was going to bring them up with her to have them reset, so that she could

"'What's wrong, eh?' He broke off a little abruptly."

wear some of them when she went to Court. I saw Rundermere in town a day or so ago, looking pretty sick he was too, and he told me, half in joke, that if I could find a man to do a little polite burgling, there were fifty thousand pounds worth of diamonds coming down to Brighton which would be worth looking after. Well, I couldn't help remembering the name, although I thought no more about it, so you can guess how I felt when the Johnnie who looks after my clothes here told me that every other room in this corridor on my side, had been taken by a Lady Mary Dunster and her niece and servants."

"They are here now?" Mannister asked calmly.

"They are in the hotel at this identical moment," Dykes answered. "There is the girl, and she's a peach. There is the old aunt, a bit of a tough 'un, but blazing with diamonds herself. Then there is a companion of the aunt, another bony old young lady, who don't seem to count for much, and two maids. The rummest part of the whole thing is that the young woman's room is

next to mine, and the jewels are in an ordinary black despatch box with an eighteen-penny padlock, underneath her bed."

"How do you know this?" Mannister asked.

"Why she had visitors the other day, and I heard her fetch one out of her aunt's room to come and see her jewels. I slipped into the room opposite, which was empty, and I heard her drag the box out from under the bed. They left the door open and I passed along the corridor a moment or two later, and there they all were upon the bed. Never in my whole life have I ever known such a soft thing. I heard one of the young women scold her for having the jewels up in her bedroom, and she only laughed, and said something about it being much safer to take no particular pains about them, because then no one would think they were valuable. I tell you it's just the easiest job I've ever known."

"What do you propose, then?" Mannister asked calmly.

"Well, I've got a key to the padlock," Dykes answered. "I could have walked

off with the box the afternoon that I looked in to see the lock, but I hadn't any plans for getting rid of it. I can get the jewels any night after she's gone to sleep, without fear of waking her. The only trouble will be to pass them on to some one who can leave the hotel without suspicion. That's where you come in."

Mannister nodded thoughtfully.

"Exactly," he remarked. "I quite see that."

"Where are you staying?" Dykes asked.

"At the *Metropôle*," Mannister declared.

"That's all right," Dykes went on. "All we've got to do is to fix upon a time. Then you pay the bill at your hotel, you bring your luggage, you stop your cab outside this place, you come up to my room to say good-bye to me. You tell them in the hall you will be down in a second, and you come down in five minutes or so with the diamonds in your pocket. You light a cigarette in the hall, give a small tip to the commissionaire who opens your cab door, and off you go to London. Hambledon is going to make some

inquiries in the city, and if he thinks it best for you to go straight to Antwerp, he will meet you, but I should doubt whether it would be necessary. You see the joke of the whole thing is that I've been practically living in this hotel for five years, and there is not a soul would suspect me or any visitor of mine. I've always paid my way and tipped the servants well, and they think I am a bit of a millionaire."

"The whole thing," Mannister remarked, "seems absurdly easy, but why choose the night at all? Why not slip in when the girl's out during the afternoon?"

"Well," Dykes answered, sipping a fresh brandy and soda which the waiter had brought him, "the girl has just enough sense to lock up her room when she goes out, and being on the first floor, there are servants passing the whole of the time. I could get a key to her room easy enough, but there'd always be a big chance of being seen going in or coming out. You see there's a service room almost opposite. She goes to bed absurdly early every night, supposed to be delicate or some-

thing of the sort, and everything's quiet in her room long before eleven. I thought if I slipped in there about twenty minutes to twelve, and you came into my room at exactly that time, you would just catch the twelve o'clock to London."

"Supposing you wake her?" Mannister asked. "She might not even be asleep."

"I shall be prepared for that," Dykes answered, a little grimly, "not that I mean to do the child any mischief, of course, but she'll be easy enough to keep quiet for a few minutes. The servants go down from my floor at eleven o'clock, and the night porter does not come on duty till midnight, so naturally the quietest time is between eleven and twelve. Now that's my idea. Do you think it good enough?"

"What do you say is the value of the diamonds?" Mannister asked, thoughtfully.

"The girl told Rundermere," he answered, "that they were worth at least fifty thousand pounds."

"We both of us," Mannister remarked,

" run a fair amount of risk. How many of us are there to stand in ? "

" Five," Dykes answered. " Besides ourselves there are Rundermere, Jacobs and Hambledon. The idea was to divide two-thirds between us two, and a third between the other three."

Mannister nodded.

" Very well," he said, " I should like to go up into your room, and I should like you to show me the door of the young lady's room. If everything is really as you say, I think it seems good enough, but there is one thing which I have to tell you."

" What's that ? " Dykes asked.

" Rundermere sent word round this morning that some one from Streeter's was going down to-morrow for the jewels, so if you really mean business it would have to be to-night. I am afraid you are not exactly in condition for this sort of work."

Dykes straightened himself and frowned.

" I can pull myself together," he said quickly. " I'd rather have had a day or so to get straight in, but it can't be helped. I

was afraid, somehow, that some meddling relative or other would suggest having the jeweller come down here, instead of waiting until they were in London. To tell you the truth, Mannister," he continued, leaning confidentially across the little table, "things have gone a bit queer with me lately, and I am relying upon this to pull me round. Safe though it seems, I would not touch it if I was not d—d hard up. It's a drop lower than anything we've touched before, but it's a big business, and it's safe. I am glad you don't mind going for it. Come up and see the rooms now. It's easy enough to take you up. I often have some pals there."

Mannister rose and paid for the brandies and sodas. He glanced at the clock. It was already twenty minutes past seven. . . .

Mannister met Mrs. De la Mere in the hall as he came down to dinner. She would have passed him by, but he stopped her quietly.

"My dear Sophy," he said, "go in peace for the present. Good luck to your little matrimonial schemes. A little later on I may have something to say to you."

She raised her eyebrows, but her assumed indifference was ill-done for so clever an actress.

"I am immensely relieved," she assured him. "We are once more friends, then."

Mannister bowed, and went on to the manager's office. The manager, who had seen Mannister's luggage, and noted the excellent hang of his dinner-coat, was exceedingly civil.

"I am afraid," Mannister said, "that I am going to waste your time, but if you have two minutes to spare——"

The manager sprang up, and wheeled an armchair to the fire.

"Anything we can do for you, Mr. Mannister," he said politely. "Can I quote you reduced terms for a lengthened stay, or do you wish your room changed?"

"Neither, thank you," Mannister answered. "The fact is I am afraid you will think that I have come on a fool's errand, but in the smoke-room this afternoon I was accosted by a man who was evidently in a half drunken state, and he insisted upon taking me for some

one whom he knew, and telling me the details of a robbery which he declared that he was about to attempt in your hotel this evening."

The manager was serious enough now, but a little dubious.

"Has the man gone, sir?" he asked.

"On the contrary," Mannister answered, "I believe that he is staying here. That is why I preferred to see you privately, rather than run the risk of our all making idiots of ourselves. His name is Mr. John Dykes, and I believe he is a book-maker, or something of the sort."

"Mr. John Dykes!" the manager repeated incredulously. "Why he has lived in this hotel for years."

"He is none the less, I should think," Mannister remarked, "something of an adventurer. From what I could understand, there is a young lady in the room next to him, who has about fifty thousand pounds worth of diamonds lying about loose. It sounds like a drunken man's story, but you know for yourself whether that part of it is true or not."

"There is a young lady in the room next to him," the manager admitted slowly, "and she certainly has some valuable jewellery, which she will not permit me, by the by, to take care of."

"Then if so much of the man's story is true," Mannister said, "let me suggest that you set a watch on the corridor outside her room to-night. He told me that he meant to make the attempt between half-past eleven and twelve, and to get away, or to send the jewels away by a confederate, by the twelve o'clock train to London. My own room is on that corridor, and I shall be awake and ready to join in if necessary."

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," the manager said. "This is a very serious matter, and I shall certainly have the corridor protected. In fact I shall watch myself. At the same time, Mr. Dykes has been a very good customer here, although he is not quite the class of visitor whom we desire to encourage. Still, he has always paid his way, and he is here in season and out of season."

"I know nothing about the fellow," Man-

nister remarked, rising to take his leave, "except that he was three-quarters drunk this afternoon, and evidently took me for one of his friends. Of course, what I have told you I have told you in confidence. I do not care about being drawn into the matter beyond the fact that I shall certainly appear if my aid is necessary."

The manager bowed out his visitor. Mannister crossed the hall and entered the dining-room. His first intention had been to dine and then walk back to the *Metropôle*, stay there until eleven o'clock, then return to his room here. About half way through the meal, however, he was conscious that Dykes was watching him covertly through the glass partition at the other end of the room. Something in the man's face and attitude inspired Mannister with a new suggestion.

Dykes, as he knew very well, was no fool. It seemed very probable that as his drunken fit wore off, and his usual cunning reasserted itself, he would regard Mannister's presence and co-operation in his scheme with a certain amount of suspicion. His present demeanour

was almost a confirmation of this. He desired evidently to remain himself unseen, but he was watching Mannister covertly, and obviously intended to see whether or no he left the hotel. Mannister, affecting not to notice him, paid his bill for dinner, regardless of the fact that he was staying in the hotel, and leaving the room in a leisurely manner, to allow Dykes time to watch him, put on his hat and coat and started round for the *Metropôle*. He stayed there only long enough to buy a handful of cigarettes, and leaving the hotel by the back way, returned to the *Bedford*, and reached his own room without seeing anything of Dykes. He turned out the electric light, and leaving his door ajar, sat on the bed and prepared to listen. In less than five minutes he heard exactly what he had expected. Dykes' door was softly opened, and Dykes himself came out into the corridor. For a moment or two he stood there, looking rapidly up and down. Then he fitted a key into the door exactly opposite Mannister's, opened it, and disappeared. Mannister opened his door a little wider, and stood there

waiting to accost him when he might come out. The events of the next few seconds happened so quickly that Mannister, although he always blamed himself for allowing the girl to run such a risk, knew upon reflection that he could not possibly have prevented it. The door of Miss Dunster's aunt's room was suddenly opened. May Dunster herself came softly out, pushed open her own door, which was ajar, and closing it after her, disappeared. The shriek which almost immediately broke from her lips was half stifled by the simultaneous slamming of the door. Mannister heard enough to terrify him. He sprang across the corridor, and found to his joy the key still in the lock. He was inside in a second. The girl was in Dykes' arms, and his right hand was drawn back as though he meant to strike her and throw her away from him at the same time. The empty box was upon the bed, and his pockets were bulging. He half turned his head as Mannister entered, and relaxed his hold of the girl. For the moment he seemed uncertain as to whether Mannister had come as friend or foe. Then something in the newcomer's

face told him, and with a savage cry he rushed at him, butting upwards with his left arm, and holding his right in reserve. Mannister, however, was prepared, and Dykes went down like a log, felled by one lightning-like blow. Mannister stood quite still, breathing hard. The fallen man's fist had just touched his jaw—there were not many tricks in the prize-fighting ring which Dykes did not know. For a moment the room seemed to spin round. Then he regained his self-control to find the girl standing before him, her eyes like stars, and her hands uplifted.

"You!" she exclaimed. "It is you always who come when I need help."

She was almost in his arms. He was conscious of a sudden wild beating of the pulses, a sense of excitement such as he had not known for many years. He held her hands, but he kept her from coming nearer. He might do that, but he could not help the things which flashed from her eyes into his and found, perhaps, some answer.

"Don't you hear them all coming?" he said. "I heard you call out just in time. My room was opposite."

"They turned on the lights and peered into the room."

The room was full of people, an excited waiter, a valet, some one from the office below. Dykes, whom they had forgotten, staggered suddenly to his feet, and for a moment was master of the situation. He stood with his back to the wall, and something small and shining flashed in his hand.

"Which shall it be, Mannister, you or the girl?" he cried out. "You hound!"

Mannister swung the girl behind him, and a valet, whose wages were a pound a week, earned for himself a public house near London, and a good deal of prospective prosperity. With a presence of mind rather remarkable, he leaned over and snapped down the electric light switch. The room was plunged into sudden darkness. Mannister stole toward the door with his arms round the girl. They could hear nothing but Dykes' hoarse breathing. Then suddenly the sound for which they waited with nerves strung almost to breaking point, came. In the small room the sound of the revolver shot, echoing backwards and forwards, sounded almost like a cannonade. Mannister, who had found the door, swung

the girl out into the corridor. The other three men were already there. They turned on the lights and peered into the room. Dykes lay there a crumpled up mass, the revolver still locked in his hand.

"The man has shot himself," Mannister said calmly. "Quite the best thing he could do. This is your aunt here, is it not, Miss Dunster? You had better go to her."

"You must come too," she begged. "I want her to know."

"To-morrow," he interrupted, a little sadly. "You must let me go now. I must talk to all these people."

* * * * *

For the next hour or so Mannister was busy answering innumerable questions, and receiving congratulations on his escape. It was one o'clock before he was able to go to his room. Before he undressed he took once more that sheet of writing paper from his pocket-book, and ruled a line through the name of John Dykes!

CHAPTER VI

A WOMAN INTERVENES

IT was a little after two o'clock in the morning when Mannister stepped out of the café, where the air was stifling, into the cool sweetness of the spring twilight. Behind him was the gay music of the little red-coated orchestra, the dulcet cries of the mesdemoiselles whom he had passed on his way down the stairs, the shouting of a coon dancer, the clatter and tinkle of glasses and crockery. It was the night world of Paris who supped! And before him, the cool dark streets, the sense of cleanliness that one feels who escapes from such a miasma into the open air. Mannister stood for a moment bare-headed upon the pavement, and the commissionnaire hastened to his side.

"Voiture pour monsieur?" he commanded with a bow.

Mannister held up his hand.

"Voiture ordinaire," he corrected, and very nearly paid with his life for the five francs he saved.

The crazy old taximeter lumbered down the hill. Mannister took off his hat, laid it on the seat by his side, and leaning back amongst the cushions, lit a cigarette. The road from the *Montmartre* to the *Continental* was one which he had taken many a time. He was somewhat surprised when the *cocher* left the main thoroughfare and took one of the turns to the right. He leaned forward in his seat a little curiously, and again fortune was with him. From behind the carriage a dark form had sprung up, and made a vicious blow with some shortly held swinging weapon at the place where Mannister's head had been. The coachman, who was in the grasp of another assailant, was yelling that he was murdered, and Mannister, whose brain moved swiftly, realized that this was probably one of those attacks by *apaches*, whose doings had been keeping the French Press busy during the last few weeks. He had no wea-

pon, nor did he require any. The man who was scrambling over the back of the carriage with a knife now gleaming in his hand, went down into the roadway with a sickening thud, as Mannister's fist crashed into his face. His companion, who had sprung into the carriage, aimed one blow at Mannister with his knife, and then ducking his head, ran. The third man, who was wrestling with the coachman, finding himself deserted, leaped to the ground and also tore off. Mannister, whose blood was up, leaped out on to the pavement and would have followed his flying assailants, but the *cocher*, also descending, grabbed him by the arm.

"They will only lead you into their haunts, monsieur!" he exclaimed. "They will murder you there! Get in, get in! We will drive fast."

"I should like to know," Mannister said, "what the devil you mean by making this turn."

"It is the nearest way, monsieur, and the stones are slippery along the Rue Pigalle," the *cocher* declared. "Jump in, monsieur,

quickly. They will return, these assassins."

Mannister reluctantly obeyed, the *cocher* whipped up his horse into a gallop, and they completed the journey to the *Hôtel Continental* without further misadventure. But Mannister had found something to think about. This was the second time a night attack had been made upon him during his three days' stay in Paris! . . . .

He reported the affair next morning at police head-quarters, and had the satisfaction of receiving a great many polite assurances from a very regretful and very much uniformed personage. Afterwards, as the morning was brilliantly fine, he walked down the Boulevard and sat for a few moments outside the *Café de la Paix*. He had been there perhaps for five minutes when he felt a touch on his arm. He looked quickly up and saw Polsover standing by his chair.

"I thought," Polsover said, "that I would give you the satisfaction of seeing me. Look! It is your work! D—n you!"

Polsover was in rags. He was the sort of person whom a gendarme would have arrested

"He looked quickly up and saw Polsover standing by his chair."

on sight for speaking to a well-dressed stranger. He was unshaven, and he had lost at least a couple of stones in weight. His cheeks were white, and in his eyes was the gleam of the hunted animal.

"Sit down," Mannister said shortly.

"I am not allowed to," Polsover answered bitterly. "The gendarmes in this neighbourhood are down on me."

Mannister rose languidly to his feet.

"Follow me," he said shortly

At the corner of the Rue Scribe he paused at a large clothing store, and beckoned Polsover to follow him in.

"You will supply this person," he said to the man who came forward to wait upon him, "with a complete outfit of clothes. Here are two hundred francs. The change I shall call for in a couple of hours."

Then he turned to Polsover.

"They will make you respectable here," he said. "When they have done with you, come to the American bar of the *Hôtel Chatham*. I shall wait there for you."

Polsover stood like a man in a dream, and

Mannister walked out of the shop and crossed the street. An hour afterwards, as he sat before one of the small tables in the bar of the *Chatham*, Polsover entered, metamorphosized, with something restored of his original carriage and bearing as he felt himself again in the garb of civilized men. Nevertheless he was curiously changed, thinner, and aged, grey about the temples, and with the spring gone from his walk. Mannister watched him approach, noticing all these things with unchanged face.

"Sit down," he said. "You will take something to drink?"

"Scotch whiskey and soda," Polsover answered. "I have been nearly poisoned with cheap drinks for the last few months. Be thankful that you do not know what it is to drink their brandy at the cafés where I have been dining."

Mannister gave an order to the barman and turned to his companion. Once more he surveyed him contemplatively.

"What the devil have you done this for, Mannister?" Polsover asked abruptly. "Are

there some further refinements of torture you have it in your mind to use against me, or do you think that I have come down low enough even for you ? "

Mannister yawned slightly.

" Don't be melodramatic," he said. " I detest it. I was quite content to let you go to the devil. When I saw you this afternoon at the *Café de la Paix,* however, the whim seized me to pull you back for a day or so, at any rate. You might be useful to me."

Polsover leaned a little across the table.

" You never spoke a truer word," he said. " I might be useful to you. In fact I might save your life."

" Is it in any particular danger ? " Mannister asked.

" Well," Polsover answered, helping himself with trembling fingers to a cigarette, " I should say that it was."

Mannister appeared pleasantly interested.

" I was right, then," he declared. " There was something in those two attacks. My friend," he continued, " you are interesting me. You talk about saving my life. I have

had to do that twice for myself within the last two days, I might almost say hours."

"Apaches?" Polsover asked.

Mannister nodded.

"Two night attacks," he said. "I put them down, of course, to the usual thing, but since your last remark I have begun to doubt it, especially as they seem to go for my person rather more than my belongings."

"The attacks were inspired," Polsover answered. "I can tell you that, and I can tell you by whom."

"It seems to me," Mannister remarked, "that it might be worth your while to do so."

Polsover leaned across the table still farther, and his voice dropped till it was almost a whisper.

"You came back to England, Mannister," he said, "a deeply wronged man, and I do not know who can blame you that you set yourself deliberately out to revenge yourself upon those who had treated you disgracefully. Four, or is it five of us, you have pretty well broken upon the wheel, and yet the man in

whose brain was hatched that scheme against you, goes so far untouched. Why ? "

"You mean Colin Stevens ? " Mannister asked calmly.

"Yes ! "

"His turn may come," Mannister said. "It may come before long."

"You are in Paris," Polsover said, "because you know that he is here. You have come in search of him."

"Possibly," Mannister admitted.

"He guesses it," Polsover continued. "You see he has met you more than half way."

"You mean," Mannister remarked, "that these attacks——"

"He is hand in hand," Polsover interrupted, "with several of the greatest criminals in Paris. He can do what he likes with some of these night gangs, who rob whom they please and defy the police."

"Where is Stevens now ? " Mannister asked abruptly.

"He was at Chantilly yesterday," Polsover said slowly. "He will be in Paris to-night."

"Are you one of his creatures?" Mannister asked.

"Not I," Polsover answered. "I went to him for alms, and he tossed me a ten franc piece and told me to go to the devil. I am not his man, or I should not have told you what I have told you."

Mannister nodded.

"I shall see Colin Stevens to-night," he said, "and he may find that the time has come for our accounts to be squared. As for you, you had better go back to England."

"How can I?" Polsover exclaimed bitterly. "My partners paid the six thousand pounds and said that I had gone abroad for a holiday. It was the only way they could save the firm's reputation."

"Exactly," Mannister interrupted. "You can return from your holiday and pay back the six thousand pounds. You may remember that my profit on that little deal with you amounted to something like sixty thousand, so I can spare you the odd six."

He took a cheque-book from his pocket and

wrote out a cheque rapidly, passing it across the table to Polsover.

"You don't mean this, Mannister?" Polsover stammered.

"Don't be a fool," Mannister replied. "I am not giving you the money. I am not afflicted by a sudden spasm of generosity. You've sold me information, and I've bought it cheap. I knew all about Atruscans. I knew very well that I was giving you a thousand pounds for something that was nearer worth one hundred thousand. If you think I'm generous, tear the cheque up if you like. If you are not a fool, you'll take it back to London and make friends with your partners. There's only one thing, mind. If you try to thank me I'll stop payment of it. I hate humbug. Now," he continued, rising, "I think that I will go round to Henri's bar and look for Mr. Colin Stevens."

Polsover, too, rose to his feet.

"He goes in fear of you," he said, "and he goes armed."

Mannister smiled as he rose and took up his hat and stick.

"I am afraid," he said, "that our friend is getting a little old-fashioned. When I am prepared to talk, it will not be arms that will save him."

Mannister turned into the Rue Danau, but he did not at once make his way to Henri's bar. He entered instead a suite of offices, and held a brief interview with the small grey-haired man who sat at a bare desk in a bare room at the top of the building, and whose plate announced that he was a private agent unrivalled in the detection of criminals, erring wives, and runaway children. Afterwards he took a fiacre to the *Café des Ambassadeurs*, and asked for the chief *maître d'hôtel*.

"I want," he explained, "to see your plan of the tables for dinner to-night."

The *maître d'hôtel* handed a chair to Mannister and brought it, together with the menu and a wine card.

"Monsieur would doubtless desire to order some dinner," he suggested blandly.

Mannister pointed to a table for two in the front row.

"I want this table," he said.

The *maître d'hôtel* was in despair, but it was impossible. That table was already engaged, also the one next to it. An excellent place on the second row, or a corner table in the front row, if Monsieur desired! But Monsieur checked him!

"Look here," Mannister said, slipping a twenty franc piece into his hand, "I want that table for a special reason,—to please madame, you understand? Give it me, and serve me my dinner yourself, and there shall be two more of these at the close of the evening."

The *maître d'hôtel* was only human. He disappeared into the bureau, and returned, with his face wreathed in smiles.

"It shall be as Monsieur desires," he announced. "The table was engaged for an excellent client, but he does not know its exact location. And for the dinner?"

Mannister took out a heavy gold pencil, and wrote with the care of a man who is proposing for himself a dinner de luxe, a list of dishes which commanded the respect

even of the *maître d'hôtel* himself. Then he added the wine and a few further particulars, and departed, walking up the Champs Elysées until he came to a turn to the right. Here he walked for a few yards down the street, rang the bell at a handsome suite of apartments, and was instantly admitted.

"Will you take my card," he asked, "to Madame de Modina?"

"Madame does not receive this afternoon," the servant remarked hesitatingly.

"Will you tell Madame that I am an old friend," Mannister said, "and that I have come from England to see her. It will be an affair of five minutes only, but she will always be grateful to me for coming. I have news for her."

The maid tripped away, and returned after a few minutes absence.

"Madame will receive Monsieur," she announced, with a smile. "Will you be pleased to come this way."

Mannister laid down his hat and stick, and followed her into a small reception-room. A woman, typically French—or was there,

perhaps, some dash of Spanish blood in her veins which accounted for the pale cheeks and blue-black hair—half rose from a couch and looked towards him inquiringly. Mannister bowed, and waited till the servant who had admitted him had left the room.

"Madame de Modina," he said, "my name is Mannister. It is doubtless unknown to you."

The lady, somewhat impressed by Mannister's appearance, murmured her regrets and pointed to a chair.

"I fear," Mannister continued, "that I shall not greatly recommend myself to you when I say that I was once a friend of Monsieur Colin Stevens."

She leaned a little towards him. The change in her expression was unmistakable.

"Once a friend?" she murmured.

Mannister bowed.

"It is because I can say that," he answered, "that I am here."

The woman's face was distorted with a sudden fit of passion. She sat upright upon the couch and stamped upon the floor with

her high-heeled shoes. She leaned forward toward Mannister, and there was something almost tragic in her expression.

"How do you dare, sir," she exclaimed, "to come here and to mention to me that man's name!"

"Because," Mannister answered, "I thought that it would interest you to know that to-night he is dining at the *Café des Ambassadeurs* with Mademoiselle de Fleurier."

She sprang to her feet and dashed to the ground the book which she had been reading.

"It has come to that, then!" she exclaimed fiercely. "He will dine in public with her!"

"It has come to that," Mannister answered.

"And you?" she asked, turning suddenly upon him, "what business is it of yours? I do not understand why you, a stranger, come here to tell me this."

"Madame," Mannister answered, "I come out of no kindness to you. I come because the man Stevens is my enemy, and because I know that it will give him no pleasure to

"She sprang to her feet and dashed to the ground the book which she had been reading."

find you dining at the next table to-night when he parades his new conquest."

"What do you mean?" she asked sullenly.

"That if you will give me the honour of being my guest to dinner to-night," Mannister said, "the table which I have engaged at the *Café des Ambassadeurs* is, curiously enough, next to the one where Colin Stevens and Mademoiselle de Fleurier will sit."

The woman walked the length of the room and back. One saw now that it was not time but grief which had written lines into her face and stolen the colour from her cheeks. She was a young woman, but she was suffering.

"At what hour, Monsieur," she asked, will you call for me?"

"At eight o'clock," Mannister answered. "We shall do well to be there first."

* * * * *

Mannister, although his back was toward the entrance, knew very well the exact moment when Colin Stevens and the lady who was his guest entered the restaurant. Two courses had passed untouched by the

woman who sat opposite to him, with her eyes fixed upon the doorway. The dash of carmine upon her lips seemed to make even more startling the dead whiteness of her cheeks. Her black eyes seemed unnaturally large and bright. People looked at her and admired. Of her type she was surely wonderful. But when Mademoiselle de Fleurier rustled in, there was a little murmur of half stifled admiration. In her wonderful lace gown and picture hat, a rope of pearls about her neck, her blonde hair faultlessly arranged, the blush of youth upon her cheeks, she was certainly a companion to be proud of. Colin Stevens, dark and tall, with streaks of grey in his hair, and lines about his worn face, nevertheless held himself like a young man, as preceded by the *maître d'hôtel* they took their seats at the little table, which by his foresight was almost smothered with pink roses. Her back was towards Mannister, whom Stevens had not recognized. It was not until several minutes after their entrance that Stevens, glancing around him for the first time, was aware of his neighbours.

Mademoiselle de Fleurier leaned across the table and touched his hand affectionately.

"You are ill, *mon ami*," she asked, "or is it a ghost that you see?"

A ghost! It was worse than that, Stevens thought, as he raised his glass to his lips and drank. Down the long avenues of his ill-spent life they came pell-mell in headlong procession, the ghosts of wronged women, of mis-spent hours, of friends deceived. It was an epitome of all these which seemed to look at him from the dark sombre eyes of the woman a few feet away. For a moment his courage faltered.

"The place is hot," he muttered, half rising.

She laughed softly and pulled him down.

"Foolish!" she murmured. "Why, we are out of doors here. Look across at the trees. See how cool and green they are in the lamplight. There is no place so cool as this in Paris. Drink some more wine. You are over-tired, perhaps."

She laughed into his eyes, and Stevens sat down in his chair prepared to face he knew not

what. All this time Mannister had not looked at him, and yet in the face of his companion he judged something of what was passing.

"Our friend, I fear," he murmured, "will enjoy his dinner none the better for finding us so near."

She smiled at him curiously.

"One cannot tell," she murmured. "He calls himself an epicure in sensations. Even this one may appeal to him—to make love to the woman he adores, a few yards away from the one he has discarded. We shall see."

She ate little, always watching her companion's plate anxiously. Mannister judged that she was in a hurry to depart, and humoured her. She declined coffee, and sent early for the vestiaire. Mannister himself arranged about her shoulders a wonderful black lace cloak. Her right hand he noticed she kept free. Was there something clutched between the fingers? He would not look. It was not his business. They passed out, Mannister, with a word of apology, leading the way and waiting for her at the turn. He

"Almost simultaneously the man's shriek rang through the place."

passed Stevens without the flicker of an eyelid. Then he heard the rustling of her skirts cease, and turned round. Almost simultaneously the man's shriek rang through the place. The little scene was in its way dramatic enough. Stevens was still standing upon his feet, his face covered with a napkin which barely stifled his inhuman cries. Before him the woman stood, immovable, her scarlet lips pressed close together, her eyes still blazing with anger. From her outstretched hand the light fumes were still curling. A great brown hole was burnt in the tablecloth just below. Mademoiselle de Fleurier had fallen backwards, and lay fainting, with her head resting upon the next table. Every one in the restaurant was standing up. One who was a doctor came hurrying from the rear. Mannister went up to the woman who had been his companion and touched her arm.

"You had better come away," he said. "They have sent for the police."

She flung his arm away.

"What do I care for the police!" she answered. "I want to see him suffer."

Mannister turned on his heel with a little shiver.

"If I had known that the woman was such a fiend!" he muttered.

Nevertheless, on his way back to the hotel he drew from his pocket-book a sheet of paper, and with firm fingers drew a line through the name of Colin Stevens.

CHAPTER VII

THE REGENERATION OF JACOBS

EVEN Luigi paused before their table on his way down the room, and looked from one to the other in some surprise.

"You are not very well this evening, Mr. Hambledon," he said. "I am very sorry. And Mr. Jacobs, too. He is very thin. You must come here to dine more often. It is the grippe, yes! All my customers have the grippe. Soon there will be no one at all who comes to eat."

The *maître d'hôtel* passed on to greet some newly arriving guests, and Hambledon and Jacobs exchanged quick glances.

"Do I really look bad, Hambledon?" Jacobs asked.

"Rotten!" Hambledon declared. "You look scared to death."

"And I back you've lost a stone the last few months," Jacobs declared, a little viciously. "I never saw a man gone off so."

Hambledon's white fingers trembled a little as he clutched his wine-glass.

"Isn't it enough to shatter a man's nerves?" he asked hoarsely, "this cursed waiting for something, and all the time we don't know what! Here's Sophy coming. Darned if she hasn't got more pluck than any of us!"

Sophy de la Mere swept into the room, followed by a couple of her youthful adorers. She was carrying a tiny little dog, and she was wearing a new and wonderful hat. She stopped to shake hands with the two men, and looked from one to the other a little scornfully.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Nerves gone wrong?"

Hambledon shrugged his shoulders.

"We haven't all your pluck," he confessed. "You've heard about Colin?"

She nodded, and her face for a moment was grave.

"Yes!" she answered. "It's a hideous thing to think of, and I am not going to spoil my dinner by talking about it. I always said that Colin would come to grief, you know, with some of these foreign women. He was altogether too fond of intrigue."

The two men exchanged glances. Perhaps she had not heard.

"You know whose hand was at the back of it?" Hambledon whispered. "You know who was this Madame de Modina's companion on the night she did it, who it was who reserved the table next to Stevens', and took her there?"

Sophy de la Mere shook her head.

"You do not mean——?" she gasped, with sudden apprehension.

"It was Mannister," Hambledon declared. "It was he who stood in the background and pulled the strings."

For a moment she was paler. Then she laughed a little unnaturally.

"That leaves only us three, then," she declared. "Upon my word, it is getting a little uncanny."

She spoke bravely enough, but even she shivered when Mannister bowed before her.

"Is this a conspiracy of three?" he asked, smiling genially at them. "You seem to be discussing some awful deed."

Hambledon sat down heavily in his seat, and little Jacobs clutched at the tablecloth, but Sophy de la Mere, after her first start, faced him bravely enough.

"I have just been told about poor Colin," she said. "It was rather a shock to me."

Mannister shrugged his shoulders.

"It was a most unfortunate occurrence," he said, "but better men than he have suffered for making love to two women at the same time. One must pay for one's luxuries, you know. Don't you agree with me, Hambledon?"

"One has always to pay, of course," Hambledon muttered, "but it was a great price. They say that he is blind for life, and that he has sworn never to be seen upon the streets."

"The streets will be the purer then," Mannister answered calmly. "I am afraid

"But even she shivered when Mannister bowed before her."

that I am not a sentimentalist. I have yet to find the man or the woman who knew Colin Stevens and was not the worse for it."

Sophy de la Mere patted her dog's head for a moment, and looked absently up the room to where her two admirers were sitting.

"Justice," she said, "is sometimes cruel, and justice seems to have been rather busy amongst us lately, Mr. Mannister. Let me see. There is Colin Stevens, blind and disfigured for life. Polsover, disgraced and exiled. Traske, robbed of an heiress and a chance of reformation, cleaning boots at a Toronto railway station. Then there is John Dykes, degenerated into a burglar and dead—temporary insanity, the jury said, but it was very nearly *felo de se*. Sinclair, gone God knows where. Rundermere, starving at a gambling hell in Cairo. Justice indeed seems to have been rather busy amongst our friends just lately—or should you call it retribution!"

Mannister smiled thoughtfully.

"Certainly," he remarked, "we have been unfortunate. Still, you and our friends Hambledon and Jacobs here, remain."

Sophy de la Mere looked him squarely in the face.

"For how long?" she answered. "Whose turn is it next"

Mannister sighed.

"My difficulties," he murmured, "are enough, without adding to them by putting you on your guard."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said, "I am ready to take my chance. Luck has gone your way so far, but it may change. I am not going to spoil my dinner by wondering what is going to happen to me before to-morrow evening."

She nodded, and swept up the room. Mannister looked after her admiringly.

"A wonderful woman that," he murmured. "By the by, what became of that little affair of hers with some young man?"

"His guardian warned him off," Hambledon answered. "Are you going to dine with us, Mannister? We've only just begun."

"I shall be delighted," Mannister answered. "To tell you the truth, I am glad to have the opportunity of a chat. You see," he added,

studying the menu, " the well of my imagination is running dry. As you remarked a short time ago, there are you two left and Sophy. Take your case, Hambledon. Upon my word, I cannot imagine what unexpected avalanche of trouble would crush you most gracefully. Or you, Jacobs," he continued. " You have not much money, you have no character, and little position. I know of no one of whom you are fond except yourself, and nothing which you care for except the acquisition of money, in which, by the by, you have not been over fortunate. You two present difficult cases."

" Then for Heaven's sake let us alone ! " Jacobs exclaimed. " You've scared us nearly out of our wits. Be satisfied with that. As for my share of your beastly trust money, I lost it long ago. The whole thing did me no good."

" The money," Mannister declared, having composed the menu to his liking, and scribbling it out with a heavy gold pencil, " is after all of no great account ; but there were the other things, you see, my friends, there were the other things to be taken into account.

By the by, this is excellent caviare. Did you try it, you fellows ? "

" No ! " Hambledon answered, gruffly. " We're not taking caviare at five shillings a time, Ernest and I. Things are none too good in the city."

" They will be worse to-morrow," Mannister remarked equably. " There is a great slump on the American Stock Exchange. I met a man outside who had just received a cable."

Jacobs sighed a little wearily.

" Well," he said, " we can't stand many more of them, that's a fact. I heard ' Grand Trunks ' were going to fall. We don't touch them on our market, though."

" The Stock Exchange," Mannister remarked, sipping his wine with the air of a satisfied connoisseur, " is an extraordinary institution. You two are always grumbling, yet I understand that you both of you make a fair living at it. You, my young friend," he added, turning to Jacobs, " have had, I understand, only four years at it. For such a short time I should say that you had been moderately successful."

"It depends upon what you call success," Jacobs answered. "What satisfies some men would not satisfy me. To get on quickly, one must save money every week, every month."

"Naturally," Mannister assented, "yet think how much better your position is than, say, a clerk in a warehouse or drapery establishment. They have neither the opportunity to save money nor to make it. You, on the other hand, have both, and if you chance to lose it, it is other people's money and not your own."

"There is something in that," Jacobs admitted, with a grin, "but you don't get many chances with other people's money. Once bit, twice shy, you know."

Mannister nodded.

"Were you thinking," he asked, as their dinner drew toward a close, "of going anywhere this evening?"

"I am off home," Hambledon answered. "My train leaves in half-an-hour."

"I thought of turning in at a Music Hall," Jacobs declared,—"the only thing to do at this hour of the evening."

"I am glad," Mannister said, "that you have no serious engagements. I should like to take you for a short drive."

Jacobs shrank a little back in his chair, and looked at Mannister in alarm. Somehow or other his words seemed prophetic Hambledon leaned a little forward.

"My train," he remarked, "goes at nine-forty."

"You will have to leave very soon, then," Mannister remarked, "or you will only just catch it."

Hambledon drew a little sigh of relief. At any rate this was a respite for him. Then he looked curiously at Jacobs, who seemed somehow to have grown smaller in his chair.

"A drive?" he faltered. "But it is a wet night, quite wet out, I believe."

"My carriage is a closed one," Mannister remarked pleasantly. "If you must go, Hambledon, good-night! Don't bother about the bill. It's my turn to-night."

Hambledon, with a moment's regret for the caviare, got up to go. Jacobs watched

"Jacobs watched him with eyes that were full of dumb appeal."

him with eyes that were full of dumb appeal.

"Stay till the next train, Hambledon," he said. "Let's have another bottle here before we go out."

Mannister shook his head.

"No!" he said. "Hambledon is a family man, and must keep his engagements. You and I will just take a liqueur, Jacobs, and then we will go for our little drive."

Jacobs made an effort to assert himself, but he spoke feebly, and without conviction.

"I am not your slave, Mr. Mannister," he said. "I do not want to go for a drive. I have an engagement for this evening."

Mannister, who was sipping his liqueur, ignored his words absolutely. He called for the bill and paid it.

"If you are quite ready," he said to Jacobs politely.

"I am ready to leave," Jacobs answered, rising, "but I am going to the Alhambra. I promised to meet a client of mine in the promenade."

"As you like," Mannister answered carelessly, "but I will drive you there. Won't you light another cigar before we go?"

They made their way outside, and the commissionaire called up Mannister's electric brougham. Even then Jacobs hesitated upon the pavement. He was more than half inclined to make a bolt for it.

"I think, if you don't mind, I'll walk," he said. "I have had no exercise to-day, and it is a fine evening."

Mannister's hand grew a little heavier upon his shoulder, and Jacobs found himself without alternative save to enter the carriage. Mannister spoke a few words to the driver before entering. The carriage glided off citywards.

"This is not the way to the Alhambra," Jacobs protested.

"It is not," Mannister admitted. "The fact is we are going to pay a little call first."

Jacobs made a sudden spring toward the door, but Mannister was too quick for him.

"Sit still," he commanded, in an altered

tone. "If you try to escape it will only be the worse for you."

"I want to know at any rate where we are going," Jacobs protested doggedly.

"You will find out very soon," Mannister answered. "You are going to call upon an old friend. You need not be alarmed. I will undertake that you receive a hearty welcome."

"An old friend?" Jacobs repeated, incredulously.

"Certainly," Mannister answered. "I can assure you that he is looking forward very much to renewing his acquaintance with you."

Jacobs for the time asked no more questions. He looked longingly out of the windows of the carriage, but he made no movement to escape. In his heart he knew very well that it was useless. They passed through the broader thoroughfares of the city, now almost deserted, and continued until they reached the Bethnal Green Road. Suddenly the carriage slowed up and came to a smooth stop. Mannister opened the door, and put-

ting his arm through his companion's, invited him to descend.

"Where on earth are we going to here?" Jacobs asked, as they stepped on to the pavement.

In front of them was a shop with plate glass windows, filled with dummies in boy's clothing, and all the other paraphernalia of a ready-made tailoring establishment. The premises were closed, and shutters had been drawn over the entrance, but Mannister led the way to a side entrance, and knocked softly at the door. Jacobs looked about him in bewilderment. Suddenly his eyes caught the name stretched across the front of the shop in great gilt letters, and his knees seemed to give way beneath him. But for Mannister's arm he would have fallen.

"No!" he cried, trying to draw back, "I will not go in here. Let me alone."

The door was suddenly opened, and before he realized it Jacobs found himself inside, with the door fast closed behind them. They were in almost complete darkness until the man who had admitted them struck a

light. His features were indiscernible. They could see only his broad back as he led the way.

"Come into the office," he said, and once more the knees of the young man, whom Mannister was half dragging along, seemed to give way beneath him. They passed along a small passage, where the atmosphere was heavy with the odour of piled-up cloth, and into a smaller room, where there was a sudden glare of light. Then the man who had been their guide wheeled round. Jacobs, whom Mannister's arm no longer supported, staggered back against the wall, and stood there with ashen face and distended eyes.

"So it is you!" he began. "You scamp! You—hound!"

No one answered. Mannister, lounging easily against the mahogany counter on one side of the room, glanced from one to the other of the two remaining figures in the little tableau. The man who had admitted them, tall and powerful, with curly black hair and hooked nose, was glaring at Jacobs as though only waiting to recover his breath before he

rushed upon him. Jacobs, speechless and terrified, was gazing towards him with fascinated eyes, a hopeless, nerveless being. It was Mannister who spoke first.

"I think, my dear Jacobs," he said, "I mentioned that we were going to call upon an old friend of yours. I can see that you recognize Mr. Goldberg, and I am sure that Mr. Goldberg has not forgotten you. I fear that there are several little matters which should have been adjusted before between you two. Perhaps you may find this opportunity a convenient one for discussing them."

"There is nothing to discuss," Jacobs faltered, with white lips. "I do not know this man. It is a mistake."

Goldberg stepped forward with an oath. Mannister held out his hand.

"Permit me," he said, "to remind our young friend here of the circumstances, which certainly do require a little explanation from him. Nine years ago I think it was that our young friend here entered Mr. Goldberg's employ as errand boy, or in some similar capacity. Our young friend was industrious,

and his position improved. Five years ago you were, I believe," he remarked, turning to Jacobs, "appointed cashier of the firm, and also your proposals of marriage to Mr. Goldberg's daughter were accepted. A very excellent position, I am sure. It is a pity that those city friends of yours should have turned your head and made you dissatisfied with such suitable, and I am sure pleasant, surroundings."

"We have had enough talking," Goldberg interrupted. "It is my turn, and I have some things to say."

Mannister stretched out his hand.

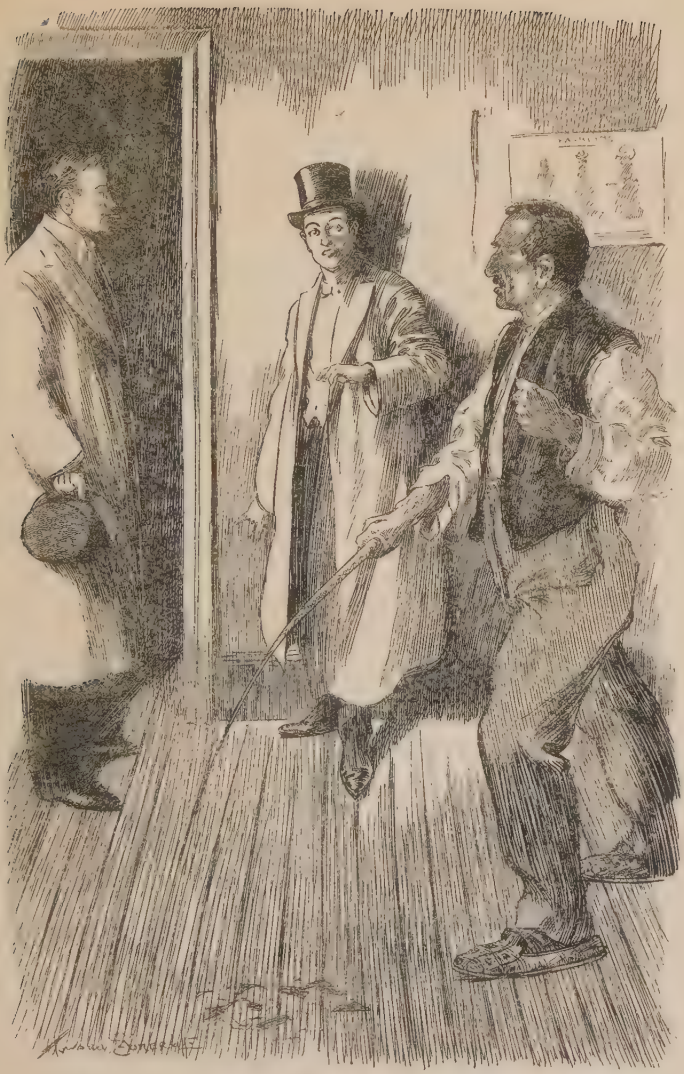
"The evening is young, my dear Mr. Goldberg," he said, "and our young friend's memory is bad. Let me remind him of the rest. Let me remind him of that morning when he disappeared, taking with him two hundred and eighty-seven pounds, fifteen shillings, and leaving behind a small but rising ready-made clothing business without a cashier, and, I fear, a very disconsolate young lady. It was an ungallant thing to do, Mr. Jacobs, very ungallant. Did you think

that a simple change of name and a clean-shaven face was sufficient to keep this past buried for ever ? "

" Oh, but he has been cunning ! " Goldberg declared, moving a little forward, and keeping his black eyes still fixed upon his victim. " He has kept very far away from all the places where he could meet me or any of my friends. Once he was a devout Jew, he went always to Synagogue. When he was engaged to my daughter he was pious all the time. And now he makes monies at the Stock Exchange, and my daughter is not good enough for him. What about that two hundred and eighty-seven pounds, fifteen shillings, eh ? "

" You shall have your money," Jacobs said, falteringly. " I meant to pay you back. It was only a loan."

" You meant to pay me back ! " Goldberg repeated, with a gleam of his white teeth. " When, I wonder ? Not till you were caught ! I think that if this gentleman had not come and asked me a few questions about a cashier named Aaron Levinstein, I



"Mannister thrust him back and paused with his hand upon the door."

think that I should never have seen you again, Aaron, you or that money."

Mannister lit another cigarette and took up his hat.

"I think," he said, "that I will leave you two to settle your differences. I have no doubt but that you will be able to arrive at a reasonable solution."

Goldberg, with an ugly smile, stretched out his hand, and took from the mantelpiece by his side a short whip. Jacobs clung to Mannister's arm.

"I will not be left here alone with him," he called out. "He will murder me. Mr. Mannister, do you hear? I will pay him the money, but I will not be left alone with him."

Mannister thrust him back, and paused with his hand upon the door.

"My young friend," he said, "you will pay him the money back, but you will also receive from the hands of Mr. Goldberg the thrashing you deserve, and you will marry his daughter, or else you will go to prison! Good-night!"

Mannister closed the door behind him and walked down the passage. As he struck a

match to let himself out, he heard a shrill cry of pain from the room which he had left. Outside on the pavement he drew a paper and a pencil from his pocket, and deliberately drew a thick black line through one of the last of the names on the list.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAKING OF HAMBLEDON

THE round table at Luigi's was laid for four, but Mannister sat there alone. He studied the menu without interest, and ordered his dinner mechanically. Then he leaned back in his seat, and his eyes for a moment travelled through the opposite walls into a distant corner of the world, and the ghosts leapt up like puppets, to bend over and deride. Mannister was very bored and very weary. As he sat there he realized that he was a man to whom fortune in all material ways had latterly been most kind, but whose life was slipping emptily away in a somewhat dreary procession of empty days and empty weeks. His lips curled a little bitterly as he realized how little indeed he valued the life which flowed in his veins and

beat in his pulses. The money in his bank lay idle, the world's many pleasures remained untasted. He lived because he was alive. There was no purpose nor any happiness in the slowly passing days. The task which he had set himself when the iron of suffering had entered his soul and made of his life a wreck, was already almost achieved. He thought of them one by one, these men who had wrought this evil thing against him, and he knew that the misfortunes which had befallen them were just and well deserved. And now even this interest in his life was passing away. Two only were left. Already he was weary to death of the executioner's knife. In all his life there remained no other purpose, he could think of no pleasure which would cause his pulses to thrill, no task which might make his heart beat the lighter.

And he was lonely! Somehow the sight of the empty table at which he sat struck a chill in his heart. It was his own hand which had thrust to their doom these quondam companions of his, and there was not one of them whom for a moment he regretted. And

yet he found his solitude distasteful, typical of his life itself. He was impatient with the weakness which made even the faintest sense of loneliness possible. And yet the empty chairs round this table spoke to him of the days when he had been like other men, with the cup of life pressed hard to his lips, and joy in his heart. Had he indeed passed outside all alone? Was his to be for all time a life of lonely days, of weariness, of solitude?

Sophy de la Mere saw him on her way up the room, and stopped and turned back. She pointed to the empty places, and she laughed at him softly, and without fear.

"You remind me," she said, "of a child who has thrown his toys out of the window, and who sits on the nursery floor bewailing his loneliness."

He smiled, and patted the head of her little dog.

"The toys," he answered, "are not all destroyed."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You must really tell me," she said, "what it is that you have done to Ernest Jacobs.

I am beginning to suspect that you may have a sense of humour. I saw him two nights ago in the pit at the Adelphi Theatre, sitting between a big, dark, Jewish-looking man and a girl, who must have been his daughter —sharp featured, with a terrible fringe. He looked as though he were wearing ready-made clothes and were trying to grow a moustache. If this is your doing it is the justice of Heaven. I never saw any one who looked so miserable and yet so thoroughly in touch with his surroundings."

A rare gleam of humour flashed in Mannister's eyes.

"I am a philanthropist," he declared. "I start out with terribly evil intentions, and in the end I simply induce people to revert to their normal state. Jacobs as a stockbroker and a man about town was a wretched *poseur*. As a partner in a retail clothing establishment, and husband to Miss Goldberg, he is in the position for which Providence intended him."

"You are not only convincing," she declared, "but reassuring."

"'Forewarned is forearmed,' he said, 'why should I give myself away?'"

"Do me the honour," he begged, "to dine with me, and we will pursue the subject."

She smiled, and seated herself at the table. Mannister was scornfully aware that her coming was a pleasure to him. He called a *maître d'hôtel* and supplemented his order. She drew off her gloves and leaned a little across the table towards him, her chin resting upon her clasped white hands.

"Your latest statement," she remarked, "interests me. Of course you know that there are only Fred Hambledon and myself left. Now if I am going to be dealt with after the manner of Jacobs, that is to say put in my proper place in the world, let me hear your idea as to what that may be."

He smiled.

"Forewarned is forearmed," he said. "Why should I give myself away?"

She pushed up her veil so that her face was exposed.

"Look at me," she said, and he obeyed. "What do you see?" she asked. "Be truthful!"

"I see," he said, "the face of a woman

who has known many things and suffered many things, and who is a little tired of them all."

"Look again," she said.

"How much shall I tell you?" he continued. "You have been beautiful, but you remain only charming. There are lines about your eyes and at the corners of your mouth. Life does not mean to you what it meant five or ten or fifteen years ago."

"Life," she said, "will never mean anything to me again. Now you know why I sit here and talk lightly with you. It is not because I do not fear you. It is because nothing that you can say can wound me, nothing that you can do can harm me. Nothing, that is to say, unless you countermand your invitation to dinner, for I could not possibly afford myself all these good things which you have ordered."

He smiled.

"The dinner," he said, "is a certainty. To tell you the truth I am indebted to you for coming. Have you ever known what it is to be lonely?"

"I have been lonely for so many years," she said, "that I shall never be lonely any more. It is past."

Mannister thought over her words as he sipped his wine.

"You are a young woman still," he said.

"I am forty-two," she answered, "and there is not a person in the world who cares two pins whether I live or die. The woman of forty-two who is loved has life before her, and all the happiness that life can hold. The woman who has reached my age without winning the love of any one, can never win anything. Her life is over."

Mannister sipped his wine thoughtfully.

"I am almost tempted," he said, "to play the part of consoler, to remind you that the spinning of time brings us always back again some day or other to those who have cared, but from whom we may have drifted away. New fires may not be lighted, but the old ones may leap again into flame."

She laughed at him softly.

"I don't know which is the more consoling," she said, "your Pommery or your philosophy.

Between the two I am certainly getting curious. What terrible scheme have you been hatching in your brain against me?"

"In your case," he answered, "one must reverse the ancient saying—'*Place aux dames.*' There still remains our friend Hambledon."

Her lips curled scornfully.

"There is just a question," she said, "whether he does exist. I think that he is very nearly frightened into his grave. They say that he never comes west of St. Paul's, never enters a restaurant, and has eschewed the music halls."

"On my account?" Mannister asked.

"Entirely," she answered. "He goes in terror of his life."

Mannister smiled superciliously.

"He never had the nerves of a rabbit," he said. "I shall be curious to see him. Isn't this——? Why, here he is!"

It was not wonderful that Mannister failed to recognize the man who a little timidly had entered the room, and stood hesitating now a few feet away from their table. Hamble-

don was still in morning dress, and he was certainly in evil condition. He had grown thinner, so that his clothes hung about him loosely. He had ceased to be particular about his linen and the folding of his tie. Behind his gold spectacles his eyes were bloodshot, and he carried with him the faint nauseating odour of the man who is an habitual drinker. Mannister beckoned to him, and he came up to the table at once.

"What the devil have you been doing to yourself?" Mannister demanded.

"I have been ill—upset—a nervous breakdown," Hambledon stammered. "I have been—d——n it all! you know what it is, Mannister!" he wound up abruptly. "Let me sit down and talk. My knees shake if I stand. Excuse me, Mrs. De la Mere. I did not recognize you for the moment."

"Sit down," Mannister said shortly. "Will you have some wine?"

Hambledon drank a glass off greedily.

"You know what is the matter with me, Mannister," he said. "Haven't I seen them all go, one by one? There's Traske, some-

where down in Hell. Polsover, a fugitive and ruined. They told me he was back, but it can't be true. Stevens, Colin Stevens, in a hospital with a bandage on his face, and God help him when the time comes for him to take it off! Rundermere, starving in some dirty foreign place. Jacobs, little Ernie, you walked him off from this very spot, and never a soul has seen him since. Dykes, dead and buried with a bullet in his forehead. I have seen them all go, and I am the last. God help me, I am the last!"

"You forget me," Sophy de la Mere said calmly.

"You and I, then," Hambledon said. "There's no one else left. They're all gone. I wish to Heaven I'd lost every farthing I possessed in the world before I'd robbed you, Mannister."

Mannister leaned back in his seat, and surveyed the other man contemptuously.

"It was not the money, Hambledon," he said quietly.

Hambledon clasped his hands and the tears stood in his eyes as he swore—

"It was not I who schemed to get you out of the country. I had nothing to do with Sinclair and that part of it, I swear. It was Stevens who thought that out."

"You were a party to it," Mannister said coldly.

"I did not approve—I did not agree," Hambledon declared. "I swear that I did not. Ask Mrs. De la Mere. There's no one else left to ask."

Mannister shrugged his shoulders.

"Let that go," he said. "Tell me why you have come here to-night like this."

"I had not the heart to change," Hambledon said. "I have lost my pluck. Hang it all," he continued, "can't you see that I'm broken? What more do you want of me? You remember the man I was. Look at me now. I am fit for nothing but the scrap-heap. If you have anything planned in your mind against me, Mannister, go on with it, go on with it quickly. You may try your hardest, but I doubt whether you can do me any further evil."

Mannister sipped his wine thoughtfully. His eyes lingered upon the man who sat on the other side of the round table, but there was no sympathy in his face, only a great contempt.

"Your temperament is too elastic, Hambledon," he said drily. "If the fear of me were removed from you to-night, you would blossom out to-morrow a new man. I am not disposed to let you off so cheaply."

Hambledon rose from his chair a little abruptly.

"Was it to tell me this," he asked, "that you sent for me?"

"Not entirely," Mannister answered. "I was curious to see you. You can go now if you like. You will hear from me again in a day or two."

Hambledon spoke one last word before he turned away.

"So far, Mannister," he said, leaning a little across the table, "the luck has been on your side, but it may change. Remember that it may change at any moment."

He turned and left the restaurant. Man-

"Hambledon spoke one last word before he turned away."

nister looked towards his companion with a smile.

"Do you believe in luck, dear lady?" he asked.

"I do," she answered, "but I believe also in you. I have had a delightful dinner, but I am afraid that I must tear myself away now. I am going round to Peggy Lancaster's to play bridge."

Mannister rose and bowed his adieux.

"I imagine," he said, "that we shall meet again before long."

She smiled at him gaily.

"Whenever you please," she answered. "I at least am not afraid of you, and I have enjoyed my dinner immensely."

Once more Mannister was alone. He ordered a liqueur, and lighting a cigarette, he sat for some time at the table. Then calling a waiter, he paid his bill and left the restaurant. From his pocket-book he took a small piece of paper and handed it up to the driver of his electric brougham.

"Find out where this is," he said, "and drive me there. It is somewhere in Balham."

Balham is a large neighbourhood, and the house which Mannister sought was in a very small street. Nevertheless they found it at last, after stopping several times for inquiries, and the carriage pulled up with a jerk in front of one of a tiny row of poor-looking houses. Mannister descended, and after looking up and down the street, rang the bell of the house opposite to him. There was some delay before it was answered. Then the door was cautiously opened by a woman, whose face was invisible in the dimly lit passage.

"Is Mrs. Hambledon in?" Mannister asked.

"I am Mrs. Hambledon," the woman answered.

"I should be glad," Mannister said, "to have a few minutes' conversation with you."

The woman looked at him in amazement, and then at the carriage which waited outside. Suddenly an idea occurred to her.

"Has anything happened to—to my husband?" she asked.

Mannister shook his head.

"Nothing that I know of," he answered. "I have some business with you, however.

Will you allow me to come in and talk to you for a few minutes?"

She led the way into a small, poorly furnished sitting-room, and turned up the light. Mannister for the first time was able to see her distinctly. The unshaded gaslight was no kinder to her than the hand of time had been. She was thin and faded. Her face bore the impress of a constant anxiety. Her eyes were deep-set. Her dress was untidy, her appearance in no way prepossessing. Nevertheless, Mannister felt that she was only the wreck of some other woman whose identity might well be lost.

"Mrs. Hambledon," Mannister said, "I have known your husband for a great many years. Lately I have made some inquiries concerning his habits and the manner of his life. It is because I am convinced that he is not behaving fairly to you and to his family that I have determined to intervene. I have some influence over your husband—we will call it influence, at any rate. May I ask if you know what his income is?"

The woman's eyes were big with astonish-

ment. She scarcely understood what all this might mean.

"Between two and three hundred a year, he tells me," she answered. "He allows me three pounds a week to keep house on and look after the children. Sometimes," she added, after a moment's pause, "it is rather hard work."

Mannister nodded.

"He allows you," he repeated, "three pounds a week, and he pays, I imagine, for this house, something like twenty-five pounds a year. And for your dress?"

"Sometimes," she said, "he gives me a little extra, but as a rule I have to buy what I want out of the three pounds a week."

"Your husband," Mannister said, "is not treating you well, Mrs. Hambledon. His income is nearer a thousand a year than three hundred pounds a year. I have some time ago been one of his associates, and I know something of the manner of his life, and I repeat that he is not treating you well."

"If," she said, looking at Mannister fixedly, "you know what you are talking about, if

there is any truth at all in what you say, then he has treated me like a devil. I was better off by far before I was married. I had a comfortable home then, and no anxieties. Now it is nothing but work and trouble from Monday morning to Saturday night. I would not mind that so much," she continued, "if there was any one to share it with me, but the children are too young to understand, and his business keeps him out always till ten or eleven o'clock, sometimes all night. That is," she added, after a moment's breathless pause, and with a sudden new light in her eyes, "if he tells me the truth!"

Mannister looked at his watch.

"Put on your hat, Mrs. Hambledon," he said, "and come with me."

"Come with you! Where?" she repeated. "What for?"

"I am going," Mannister said, "to make things quite clear to you, and then I am going to show you how to act so that you may have a different husband and a different home."

The woman did not hesitate. She disap-

peared for a few moments, and returned dressed quietly enough, but with some remnants of gentility, for the street. Mannister placed her in the carriage and sat by her side. They drove almost in silence to a small block of flats near the Museum. Here Mannister assisted her to alight and whispered a question to the janitor, who shook his head.

"We have an appointment for ten o'clock," Mannister said. "Take us up into his rooms and let us wait."

He slipped a half sovereign into the man's hand, who showed them at once into the lift. On the fourth floor he stepped out and opened the door of one of the flats. The man retreated, closing the door after him.

"Why have you brought me here?" Mrs. Hambledon asked, looking around. "I do not understand."

"You will see," Mannister remarked, "that this is a cosy little suite, small but comfortable. There is a bedroom in there, and a bathroom. The sitting-room is not, perhaps, elaborate, but still it is well enough for a bachelor. Go into the bedroom for a minute

and tell me whether you recognize any of the things you see there."

She disappeared, and came back in a moment with white, scared face.

"There are some of my husband's clothes there, and his shaving things," she said.

Mannister nodded.

"Anything else?" he asked quietly.

The woman covered her face with her handkerchief and sobbed. Mannister laid his hand gently upon her shoulder.

"We are going to have all this changed," he said. "You must not worry. Life is made up of disappointments, you know. I dare say there are many worse in the world than your husband."

She looked up at him again in a moment.

"Tell me," she asked quietly, "what concern all this is of yours?"

Mannister smiled.

"In a few minutes," he said, "your husband will be here, and you may understand a little,—you will never understand altogether. It is sufficient if I tell you that I think I can make your husband promise that there shall be

no more of this sort of thing," he added, after a moment's pause.

The woman sat down, and with her chin resting upon her hands, looked fixedly into the fireplace.

"We have been married," she said, in dull, even tones, "eleven years. For the first year I was fairly happy, the second year things were a little different, and since then every year they have been worse. God knows what a struggle it has been lately. Fred has been home scarcely at all. We have never been away. I have not seen the inside of a theatre for five years. And all the time, all the time——"

She did not finish her sentence. Mannister said nothing. There was nothing which he could say.

"I think," she began again in a moment, "that I would rather not have known. It was bad enough before, but now it is worse. If it were not for the children——" she added softly.

Then of a sudden a key turned in the door and Hambledon entered. When he saw who

it was that waited for him, he stood stock still, rooted to the ground with surprise. His wife rose slowly to her feet. Somehow or other she was no longer the poor faded creature whom Mannister had found. There was dignity as well as character in her attitude, and the calm level gaze which she turned upon him.

"Shut the door, Hambledon," Mannister ordered.

Hambledon obeyed like a man in a dream.

"Now give me the key," Mannister continued.

Again Hambledon obeyed. All the time he kept glancing furtively towards his wife.

"I do not think," Mannister said quietly, "that this is a situation which calls for many explanations. With a view to adjusting the little difference that remains between us, Hambledon, I made certain inquiries with regard to you and the manner of your life. The result was that I discovered you to be one of those selfish brutes who deceives his wife as to his means, and lives in luxury himself, while he forces his family to subsist on a

beggarly pittance. Your wife knows everything, Hambledon. She will forgive you on certain conditions. Tnree parts of your income is to be spent in maintaining a proper establishment for her and your children. This flat you do not enter again. Your spare time, whatever it is, with reasonable exceptions, is to be given to fulfilling your duties as a husband and a father. Your acceptance of these conditions settles the difference between us. If you refuse them, or your wife refuses to forgive you, that difference must be settled in another way."

The man and the woman stood looking at one another. Dimly she seemed to understand that there was some danger with which her husband was threatened, and that it came from Mannister. She looked at him almost threateningly, and half held out her arms to her husband. Mannister turned away with a faint smile.

"My terms, I see," he began,—

"Are accepted!" both the man and the woman declared.

Mannister pointed to the door.

"Mannister turned away with a faint smile."

"Let me suggest, then," he said, "that you take your wife round to a restaurant and have some supper. I will see to the shutting up of this place. And, Hambledon, remember I am not to be deceived."

Mr. and Mrs. Hambledon left the place arm in arm. Mannister locked up, and descended a few minutes later with the key in his pocket. On his way back to his rooms, he drew out the list which he still carried, and drew a line through Hambledon's name. Then he looked reflectively at the sheet of paper, now worn with much folding. One by one those straight black lines seemed to tell their own story. Only one name remained, the name of Sophy de la Mere!

CHAPTER IX

AT THE END OF THE JOURNEY

"SINCE when," Mrs. De la Mere asked, "have you been your own chauffeur?"

"Since I bought a car of my own," Mannister answered. "One must do something. I hate golf, I am too old for cricket. The sports I know anything of come later. This is interesting, at any rate, and one gets into the country easily."

"Interesting?" she repeated. "I call it delightful! And you drive as though you knew all about it. I declare that I am not in the least nervous."

Mannister did not reply, for they were still in the suburbs of London, and the great car which he was driving needed all his attention. But soon the tramway lines came to an end,

the road broadened, they were passing from suburbanism to the country proper. Mrs. De la Mere leaned back amongst the cushions and half closed her eyes.

"After all," she murmured, "I am sure that there is nothing more beautiful than the simple pleasures of life. What is it in the hedges that smells so sweet?"

The west wind blew in their faces. Mannister took off his cap and threw it behind to the chauffeur.

"Why do we waste our time at Ranelagh and Richmond?" he remarked. "The Londoner's love of the country, after all, has something artificial about it. One likes groves and trees and flower-beds, but one loves the flavour of civilization with them all."

"A basket chair on the lawn, and cucumber sandwiches with one's tea," Mrs. De la Mere murmured. "But this, at any rate, is the real thing."

They rushed on through the fragrant air. It was a late warm day in spring. The violets were still in the hedges, and the early cowslips

were showing in the meadows. Above their heads the birds were singing. Here and there an early butterfly fluttered across the honeysuckle-wreathed hedge.

"It is years," Mrs. De la Mere murmured, "since I really felt that I was in the country. Do you know, I wonder, that I once lived in a village?"

Mannister looked straight ahead down the white dusty road.

"Yes!" he said. "I know that you did. I seem to have one of those wearisome memories that forget nothing. I remember even, I believe, the name of the village where you lived."

They passed a hay-field, caught for a moment the delicious perfume of the falling grass, and heard the musical whirr of the mowing machines. Then on again across a common, where the yellow gorse was budding, and far below a faint blue mist rose from the lower lands.

Mrs. De la Mere raised her veil, and forgot that there was powder upon her face. There was something familiar about the swiftly

rushing air, the song of the birds, and the sunshine. She turned a little doubtfully toward Mannister.

"Will you tell me why," she demanded, "you have asked me to come with you to-day?"

He shook his head.

"Not yet," he answered. "Call it a whim if you like."

"You are not a person of whims," she said thoughtfully. "You do not do things without an object. Why did you ask me to come with you?"

"If I had any reason at all," Mannister said, "beyond the obvious one of securing for myself a delightful companion, you will know very soon. In the meantime, be patient. Surely there are worse ways of spending a spring day than this!"

"I am content," she murmured. "Even though you are my enemy, I am at least going to meet my fate pleasantly. How far are we going, my host? What shall we find at the end of the journey?"

"We are going a long way," he answered,

" and what we find at the end of the journey depends a little upon ourselves."

The villages grew fewer and the road more deserted. Mannister increased the pace of the car, and with the gathering speed, the possibility for conversation, so far as he was concerned, seemed to pass away. He sat a little forward in his seat, his eyes fixed upon the road ahead, his whole attention riveted upon his task. The woman at his side, who had all the courage of the fatalist, sat there calm and without misgivings. If the time had come for the payment of her debt to this man, she knew him well enough to be sure that no protests of hers would be of any avail. Her chief sensation was curiosity. Of late she had had some curious thoughts concerning Mannister. She had begun to wonder whether he were indeed the man of steel he seemed.

They stayed for lunch at a wayside inn. Mannister ate little, and seemed restlessly anxious to depart. She had taken it for granted when they started off again that he would turn back toward London. In-

"Mannister ate little and seemed restlessly anxious to depart."

stead he kept the car going steadily westwards.

"I am not unduly curious," she remarked, settling down once more by his side, "but we seem to have come about a hundred miles, and you are still rushing away from London. Is this a day excursion? Do you intend to be back in London in time for dinner? I have not come prepared for a tour."

"When we return," Mannister said, "depends on many things. At present we are going straight ahead. If it becomes necessary, there is always the railway."

"For me," she murmured, "no railway. I am content. Drive like this through such a country, and I do not care whether it be night or day. In an hour or two I shall forget that I am an old woman, and that my home is under the limelight."

"No one's home is there," Mannister answered. "We flutter around those lights like moths around a candle. We imagine ourselves prisoners, but in our hearts we know that we lack only the will to be free. Once

we have made up our minds to break away, then the rest is not so difficult."

Mrs. De la Mere smiled bitterly.

"My friend," she said, "I beg your pardon, my enemy—you speak now of things you know little about. The chains that bind us to our every-day life, the chains of custom and habit, are not easily broken. Sometimes they are lengthened, and we stray a little farther away, but one always goes back; that is to say, we ordinary people do. There may be men who are strong enough to file away the rivets—men, not often women!"

Mannister bent over the handles and the car slackened speed. He brought it to a standstill close to the left-hand side of the road, beneath a grove of chestnut trees. Across the low hedge they could see an old-fashioned ivy-covered house, with lawns coming down almost to the road. A little pathway from the house, bordered by a ring fence, passed close to the side of the hedge and ended at the drive a few yards further on. Beyond was a small paddock, and several rhododendron beds in the zenith of their

splendour. Mannister took out his case and lit a cigarette.

"A peaceful little place that," he remarked.

She withdrew her eyes from the pink-budded chestnut blossom overhead, and looked across the lawns towards the house.

"It is charming," she said.

"I wonder," he continued, "what sort of people are content to live there. Are they young or are they old? Do they live here for rest, or because they have not yet felt the call of the lights?"

"Who can tell?" she answered, idly. "Why do you stay here so near to the gates? They could see you from the windows of the house."

"Why not?" he answered. "At least one is free to admire their chestnut blossoms. They do not know that we have presumed to wonder as to what sort of people they may be. Besides, I am not at all sure that they can see us from here."

A girl came suddenly through the open door of the house, and stood upon the farther lawn. Her hands were behind her, and she

was looking steadily back in the direction whence they had come. She was tall and graceful, her fair hair was brushed simply back from her forehead, her gown was white, simply made, and a little short. Whilst they watched her she raised her hand and shaded her eyes. Mannister looked from the girl to his companion.

"You see," he murmured, "she is typical of all the world. She is looking to where, beyond the horizon, those lights are calling. She has probably just left school, a convent in Belgium or Paris perhaps, and she is longing for the things which come with freedom."

Mrs. De la Mere had watched the girl with fascinated eyes. Suddenly she looked away.

"Do drive on!" she said, in a low tone. "I never like looking at children of that age."

"We cannot go for a moment," Mannister answered. "The engine needs cooling. This rest is doing it good. Tell me what you think she is looking for, that child."

Once more Sophy De la Mere's eyes were fixed upon the slim girlish figure. She stared as one who is fascinated against her will. At that moment the door of the house opened, and an elderly man, leaning a little upon his stick, came out. He passed his arm through the girl's and they began to walk slowly towards the little path. Mrs. De la Mere stirred in her place uneasily.

"Can't you start the car, Mr. Mannister?" she asked. "If they come all the way round the path they will pass along by the side of the hedge, and they will think that we stopped here to watch them."

Mannister shook his head.

"Five minutes or so we must have," he said. "This is a new car, and I dare not risk having her over-heated. Open the bonnet, George," he added, turning round to the chauffeur. "She is hot, isn't she?"

"A little, sir," the man admitted.

"Change the sparking plug in No. 2 cylinder," Mannister ordered. "I like this place and I do not want to hurry," he added, turning to his companion. "If they walk

round here now they will think we are merely doing a little repairing."

Mrs. De la Mere was leaning a trifle forward in her seat. Her eyes never left the two approaching figures. Mannister heard her breathing softly. Suddenly she drew down her veil and leaned back in the seat. He caught a glimpse of her face, and he was a little alarmed.

"Are you faint?" he asked.

"No!" she answered. "Let me alone!"

He felt her hands clutch at the cushions. The man and the girl came along the path close to where their car was standing. As they passed the man raised his hat and turned to Mannister.

"I hope you are not in any trouble, sir?" he asked civilly. "Can we be of any assistance?"

"Thank you very much," Mannister answered. "We are only doing a very slight repair. It will barely take five minutes, but we could not resist choosing such a delightful spot for our brief rest."

The two passed on. Mrs. De la Mere turned slowly round in her seat and her eyes

followed them. Her breath was coming fast. She made no apologies to Mannister, for she knew very well that he understood. When at last she spoke to him her tone was almost hysterical.

"You are getting more subtle in your tortures," she said. "Is it over now? May we go on?"

"No!" he answered. "It is not over!

"What do you mean?" she asked hoarsely.

Mannister called to the chauffeur, who was on the point of completing his task.

"Take my flask to the lodge gates there," he directed, "and have it half filled with water. You need not hurry. We shall be here for another quarter of an hour."

"Very good, sir," the man answered, and a few seconds later disappeared. Mannister turned once more to the woman by his side.

"Sophy De la Mere," he said, "you are the last upon that list which I have carried in my pocket since my return to England. One by one those names have been crossed off. Yours alone is left there. This morning I am going to draw a line through your name

too, and scatter the fragments of that little document for the west wind to play with. But before I draw that line you must pay."

"Haven't I paid?" she moaned. "Do you think that I am so callous? Do you think that the passing of those two was not agony as great to me as anything those others may have suffered?"

"Perhaps," he answered, "and yet you have not paid!"

"Then for Heaven's sake tell me quickly what it is that I must do," she demanded. "Shall I tear off my veil and go and confront them? Shall I throw my arms around the man who was my husband, and embrace the child who was my daughter? I am not asking for your mercy. I only beg you to tell me quickly and let me get it over."

"You have," he said quietly, "divined your task. You are going into the garden, and you are going to speak to those two."

She looked at him in something like horror.

"You are brute enough for that?" she whispered.

"Remember," he answered, "that your

suffering, if suffering it be, is a matter of a quarter of an hour. There are others on my list who will not forget so long as they live that I have been their enemy."

She laughed fiercely.

"One can suffer enough in five minutes," she answered, "to carry the brand of one's suffering to the doors of death."

"It will be your hard fortune if you find it so," he answered. "Allow me!"

He had descended from the car and stood with outstretched hands. She shrank away from him.

"I will not come," she said.

Mannister remained unmoved. His hand was still extended. He said nothing. He simply waited.

"You cannot ask this thing of me," she moaned. "It is impossible. There is nothing for me to say. I could not bear to look her in the face."

Still Mannister did not move. Still his hands were stretched out and his eyes fixed upon hers. With a little sob she descended and stood by his side. Without a word he

led her through the gate. The girl had gone into the house. The man, who was on the upper lawn, saw them coming and advanced courteously to meet them. When he was still a few yards off, something perhaps in the woman's figure or her walk impressed him. He stopped short. The woman swayed, but Mannister held her firmly by the arm.

"Mr Heronswell," Mannister said quietly, "I should be glad if you could spare me five minutes. I have something to say to you."

The man stood motionless, but he was looking at the woman by Mannister's side, Mannister took his acquiescence for granted.

"It would be better," he said, "if you would come a little farther from the house, say to that seat under the cedar tree."

The man had not the will to go. Mrs. De la Mere was trembling so that movement seemed impossible. Yet they went where they were bidden, and the woman sank upon the seat.

"Mr. Heronswell," Mannister said, "I am neither philanthropist nor meddler. I am

"With a little sob she descended and stood by his side."

one of those who by force of circumstances live outside the world, and realize the truth of the most trite of all sayings, that 'Outsiders see most of the game.' You knew me years ago. My name is Mannister. I knew this lady when she was your wife. You disagreed, she treated you badly, and there was a scandal. She left you, and through some quixotism you declined to divorce her. That is to say you left her upon the world a woman with no clearly defined position. You never gave her the chance to marry again or to start a new life. In other words, your whim, for it was nothing more, is responsible for anything that may have happened to her since."

"I am a Catholic," the man said slowly, "and I do not recognize divorce."

"And I," Mannister answered quickly, "recognize no creed whatever save that one which teaches men and women to be the keepers of their own conscience. I should like you to understand that Mrs. De la Mere had no notion this morning of where she was coming, or of whom she was going to see. She had no notion of making any sort of

appeal to you, she did not even know where you lived. It is I who planned this visit, and the first part of it has been a penance to her sufficient to cover many sins. For the rest, I want you at least to hear from an outsider a little summary of the present situation so far as it concerns you, your conscience, and the woman who was your wife."

"Who was my wife!" the man repeated, looking fixedly at the figure upon the seat. Mrs. De la Mere's head had dropped between her hands. Mannister was executioner indeed.

"Briefly," Mannister said, "the outsider's view is this. You declined to give your wife her freedom. Therefore I say that her subsequent life, whatever it may have been, is of your making. Her sins and her weaknesses can be written down to your account, and I think that the account is nearly full. It is time for you to intervene, for your own sake, for hers, and for your daughter's."

"You mean," Heronswell said, and his voice seemed to them all to come from a long way off, "you mean that I should apply now, after all these years, for a divorce?"

Mannister did not answer for a moment. A breath of wind brought them a waft of faint sweet perfume from the rose bushes. The momentary silence was broken only by the humming of bees and the soft sighing of the wind in the little grove. All the time Heronswell's eyes were fixed upon Mannister.

"You mean that," he repeated, "after all these years?"

"No," Mannister answered, "I do not mean that? I mean that her place is here with you."

The woman rose suddenly up. For the first time she spoke.

"Bernard," she said, "don't listen to him. I did not know. I would not have come if I had known what he was going to say to you. Shake hands with me once if you will, and let me go. I am afraid to stay here. I am afraid that she will come back."

The woman looked anxiously up toward the house. Heronswell turned his head and followed the direction of her gaze.

"She is very like you were, Sophy," he said quietly.

"Take care of her," the woman sobbed, "and don't be too stern."

"No!" the man answered, thoughtfully. "I have learnt my lesson."

The woman stepped back with a little gasp. She would have hastened away toward the lodge gates, but Mannister caught her by the wrist. The girl, with a rose basket upon her arm, was coming round the side of the house, and seeing them had hesitated for a moment.

"Heronswell," Mannister said, "in the old days you were a little to blame. You have a chance now to prove yourself a man. Take her back. Give the girl her mother. You will never repent it."

The woman struggled to get away, and Mannister pointed towards the house. The girl was coming slowly towards them.

"Look," he said, "there is something there which should call to you loudly and sweetly enough to break your heart in the days to come if you should close your ears. Heronswell!"

He passed her hand on to Heronswell, who grasped it in his own and drew it towards

"The woman struggled to get away."

him. Mannister, with a faint smile, raised his hat and swung round. The chauffeur was in his place, and with a touch of the handle the engine was started.

"We are not waiting for the lady, sir?" the chauffeur asked.

Mannister shook his head, and the car swept on. . . .

Mannister dined alone in his rooms that night, for though he drove with a recklessness somewhat unusual to him, it was eight o'clock before he reached London. Behind him lay the fragments of an eventful day; the fragments, too, of that torn paper, which seemed to him somehow to have become associated with all the changing passions of his later life. He dined alone, and he sat alone afterwards, thinking. It was not until past ten o'clock that he noticed the little pile of letters by his side. One by one he glanced them through carelessly enough. He came at last to a black-bordered envelope, which he tore open. The announcement it contained was brief enough. Sir George Mannister, of Sherwell Court, was dead, and his

lawyers would be glad to receive instructions from the new baronet. Mannister threw it aside, and leaning back in his chair laughed long and loudly.

"So the game goes on," he muttered to himself. "It is only necessary to hate the days that come and the things they bring, to achieve complete success in life. I was robbed of a fortune and I made a larger one. One by one the people who robbed me have paid the price. Premier baronet! I think that I must end it very soon, or I shall begin to think that I am a descendant of Monte Cristo."

He tore open the other letters recklessly. Almost the last one was from Dunster, with whom he had exchanged now and then small civilities. He was staying at Nice with his daughter, and begged Mannister to come out.

"By the by," the letter wound up, "there is a man here who mentioned your name once. Perhaps you used to know him. He calls himself Gaston Sinclair. I hope you will decide to run out, if it is only for a few days. The journey is easy, and the weather out here

is delightful. I know that England doesn't mean much for you in the spring. Do make up your mind, and send me a telegram to-morrow."

Mannister did not wait until the morrow. He kept his finger pressed to the bell button until his servant hastily appeared.

"A Continental ABC at once, Morton," his master ordered.

CHAPTER X

HIS LAST QUEST

WITHIN twenty-four hours of his arrival in Nice, Mannister came face to face upon the Promenade with the man he sought. Yet it is certain that if Dunster, with whom he was walking, had not called attention to him, Mannister would have passed him by without recognition. Sinclair was old and bent. His face was haggard, and he walked with tottering footsteps, leaning upon the arm of a servant. He recognized Mannister quickly enough, and there was a flash in his eyes which bespoke other things than the mere meeting again of two men who had once been friends. Dunster, who saw that the meeting of these two was no ordinary encounter, passed on. Mannister

and Sinclair stood face to face. The latter turned to his servant.

"I will go to that seat," he said, pointing. "I want to talk for a few minutes with this gentleman."

"I am sorry," Mannister said politely, as they walked thither, "to see you in such indifferent health."

Sinclair answered him with a look of hatred, but he did not speak a word until the servant had gone.

"Don't tell lies, Mannister," he said then. "I am what you made me. I have never been myself for a single day since you chased me half over the world. Don't tell lies about being sorry for me. You are sorry for no one who stands in your way, or who does you ill. Oh, I've heard things!" he went on. "I've heard—never mind! There is nothing you could do to me. I'm past it. You couldn't even strike a helpless brute like I am. I at least can defy you."

"Where is your wife?" Mannister asked steadily.

"I have no wife," the other answered. "I have never been married."

Mannister was very quiet, but there was something in his still voice which made the other, notwithstanding his assurance, crouch back in his seat.

"Do you remember, Gaston Sinclair, what I told you would happen if you failed to take up the charge I laid upon you?"

"I was willing to do it," Sinclair answered. "Upon my soul I was willing to do it. Look here, I knew I should meet you some day, and I made her write this."

With trembling fingers he drew from his breast pocket a sheet of paper and handed it to Mannister. Upon it was written a few sentences in delicate feminine handwriting.

"Gaston Sinclair has offered to marry me and I have refused. Nothing would induce me to become his wife. I write this at his request. Christine."

Mannister held the paper in his hand much longer than was necessary to decipher those

"There was something in his still voice which made the other . . . crouch back in his seat."

few sentences. He read it over and over again. He fancied even that there came from its folds a faint suggestion of the perfume which always hung about her clothes and her belongings. Then he folded it up, but he did not pass it back to the other man.

"Why did she refuse to marry you?" he asked.

Sinclair laughed,—a hard unpleasant sound it was.

"Because from the day you left us on the Oomanda Plain, she hated me. Because from that day to this she never even suffered her fingers to rest in my hand."

"Where is she?" Mannister asked coldly.

"I do not know," Sinclair answered. "I have neither seen nor heard from her since the day she left the hospital at Buenos Ayres."

"She was ill, then?" Mannister asked.

"She was taken ill with a fever the day you left," Sinclair answered. "They got her back to the city and into the hospital. I stayed there, although she refused always to see me. When she was well enough to

leave I saw her for five minutes only. I made her write down her refusal of what I offered. Apart from that she declined to have anything to say to me. She would not tell me her plans, where she was going or what she meant to do. She had finished with me, and she told me so as plainly as a woman could speak. I came back to England, and I have been as you see me ever since."

"You left her in Buenos Ayres?" Mannister said.

"I know only that she came to London," Sinclair answered.

Mannister's teeth were hard set. He was looking out through the network of luxurious shrubs to where the blue sea was dotted everywhere with white sails. Sinclair leaned a little forward in his seat watching him. His long lean fingers were shaking, his eyes were bright with malicious satisfaction.

"Mannister," he said, "if one comes near to death one sees things clearly. It was a hellish trick those men sought to play upon you. They made only one mistake. They

did not think that you would leave me alive. I had some of the money they robbed you of. Do you want it back?"

"No!" Mannister answered. "I am a rich man. It was never the money, Sinclair."

"I came back to England," Sinclair continued, "and I watched them go, broken men, one by one. I am the last of them, Mannister. Are you sure that there is nothing you would like to do to me? Can't you think of something in the shape of suffering you could bring down upon my shoulders?"

Mannister rose to his feet.

"No!" he said. "As you are I am content to leave you."

The other plucked at his sleeve.

"Sit down, Mannister," he said. "Listen calmly if you can. Do not strike me. Look at what I am, and restrain yourself. I did not win your wife away from you fairly. She did not go because she loved me and hated you. I forged letters and showed them to her. I invented lies and filled her ears with

them. She charged me with it that day after you had caught us, and I told her the truth."

Mannister looked at him as one might regard some noxious insect.

"I shall not strike you, Gaston Sinclair," he said. "To be what you are, and to know yourself for what you are, is punishment enough for any one on earth."

Mannister turned on his heel and walked back to the villa where he was staying. A travelling carriage, piled with luggage, was standing there at the door. May Dunster, who had just arrived from Rome, came out to meet him.

"Mr. Mannister," she said, a little shyly, "this is delightful. I had no idea that I should find you here."

"I had no idea of coming," he answered, "but your father in his invitation happened to mention the name of a man whom I was very anxious to see. I came, and I have seen him, and now I am afraid that I must go away."

"Not just yet," she pleaded. "You must

stay for a few days. And I forgot. I must call you Sir George, mustn't I ? "

" You can call me anything you like," he answered. " Have you seen your father ? I left him upon the promenade."

" Never mind about my father yet," she answered. " I want to talk to you for a few minutes. There was no one else in the world whom I wanted so much to see. Come down into the garden."

He followed her a little unwillingly to a spot where the shrubs had been cleared away, and where one looked down upon the white-washed villas and gardens of Nice, and beyond the sea. She turned and motioned him to lean by her side against the railing.

" I wanted," she said, " so much to see you. I wanted to ask your advice."

He smiled a little bitterly.

" I am afraid," he said, " that one who has done so ill with his own life, is a poor person to show others the way to happiness. However, tell me what it is that troubles you, and I will do my best."

" I have been in Rome," she said, " for

two months with my aunt, and on the whole—yes, I am sure that I have enjoyed it very much indeed. From the first there was some one there who was very nice and kind to me. He took us, my aunt and myself, to all the places I wanted to see. He always danced with me and rode. No one could have been so kind or so delightful as he was. And then, a few days before I came away, he asked me to marry him."

Mannister nodded.

"What was his name?" he asked.

"Phillimore," she answered. "He is a son of Lord Ernest Phillimore, the ambassador at Rome."

"I know him," Mannister remarked. "At least, that is I have met him once or twice. If he is only half such a decent fellow as I thought he was, and as I know his father is, you ought to be very happy."

She turned and looked into his face, looked with such earnestness that he felt obliged to turn toward her. There was nothing in his eyes which answered in the least the somewhat wistful gleam which shone in hers.

She looked at him steadily, and when she turned away she sighed a little.

"Well," she said, "when he asked me I could not answer him. It seemed to me that I liked him very much, but there was something away back in my thoughts which kept me from saying yes to him, as it would have kept me from saying yes to any one. Perhaps it was a little girlish sentiment, perhaps it was something more. But I did not know, I could not feel sure of myself, because, you see, it was something which, however foolish it may seem, has somehow grown almost dear to me. I did not feel that I could part with it very easily. I did not feel that I could marry any one unless I found out really whether it was just a fancy founded upon a dream, or whether there was anything real beneath it all. I thought," she added wistfully, "that I should know the truth when I met you again. I told Arthur Phillimore that I could not answer him for a little time. When I said a little time, what I really meant was that I could not answer him until I had seen you."

Mannister smiled down upon her with the grave seriousness of a person belonging to some elder generation.

"My dear child," he said, "I do not quite understand. If it is my advice you are asking, I give it to you frankly and honestly. I should like to hear that you were engaged to marry Arthur Phillimore."

"Do you mean that?" she asked, and he fancied that there was a shade of disappointment in her tone.

"I mean it," he answered.

And then for a moment he let his hand rest upon hers.

"Little girl," he said, "I think I know what it is that you have had in your mind. You have been a little sorry for me because you have known that I have not been altogether happy, and your kind little heart was touched. It was very sweet of you, and I shall never forget it, but that sort of thing has nothing to do with the love which you must have for your husband. I am old enough to be your father, and although I do not speak of these things because there is trouble connected

with them, I have a wife who lives still somewhere. Write and tell him your answer. I should like so much to see him before I leave Nice."

He raised the hand upon which his fingers were resting to his lips, and turned away toward the house. Those few tears he knew very well would soon have passed. Already he was only anxious to leave the place.

* * * * *

Then Mannister became a wanderer upon the face of the earth. He sought no new lands, nor did he betray the traveller's interest in unexplored places. He passed from country to country of Europe, he was heard of even in the great cities of America. To all appearance his journeying was the journeying of a restless man. For two years he neither shot nor hunted, sport of no kind seemed able to attract him. The few people who met him spoke of him as aged. With the scattering to the winds of those fragments of paper, it seemed as though the purpose had gone out of his life. There was no one

who suspected that his restless travelling hither and thither was in reality nothing more nor less than a search. It was in Paris that he received the first gleam of encouragement in all those weary two years. He was driving down from the Bois one afternoon, and when in the Champs Elysées he passed a carriage in which were seated two ladies, one old and one young. He himself was in a hired voiture, looking down with only faintly simulated interest upon the constant stream of automobiles and carriages. Nevertheless their eyes met, although it was only for a second, and Mannister, galvanized into sudden and complete life, springing to his feet, stopped the *cocher* and upset the whole traffic for several moments, as in obedience to his peremptory orders they turned round and endeavoured to overtake the retreating carriage. Their effort was in vain. The tired hack had no chance against the pair of thoroughbreds, who were already almost out of sight. But Mannister was too much in earnest to be easily turned aside from his purpose. The liveries of the carriage, dark

green, and the small coronet upon the panels, served him as a basis for a restless fire of inquiries directed to the gendarmes, the commissionaire at the famous restaurant in the Bois,—wherever there seemed a chance of obtaining information. Late that night Mannister obtained the information he sought, and at mid-day the next morning he was ushered into the presence of Madame la Comtesse de Lanier, in whom he recognized at once the elder of those two women. Mannister's apologies were brief.

"I trust, Madame," he said, "that you will pardon my intrusion, but for two years I have been searching for the lady whom I saw in your carriage yesterday afternoon. She is perhaps your guest in Paris."

Madame la Comtesse touched the bell even as she answered him.

"Monsieur," she said, "the history of that lady is very well known to me. Be assured that you will never hear of her or from her under this roof. She was my guest. I was hoping that she would remain so for some time to come. But at the sight of you

she packed her trunks. By this time she is far from Paris."

"Her address?" Mannister demanded. "She does not understand. I do not wish her any harm."

Madame la Comtesse turned to the servant who had answered her summons.

"The door to Monsieur," she ordered, and Mannister had no option but to go.

He returned to London, accepted an invitation to visit some friends in Scotland, and left again at the end of two days absolutely incapable of devoting himself to the purpose of his visit, the shooting of his host's grouse. He spent a few days in London, and was on the point of leaving it when he received a letter from May Dunster, written from a small town in the north of Italy.

"I am writing," she said, "not only to remind you of your promise to come to my wedding in Rome next month, but to ask you to do something which you will probably think strange, but which I will explain when I see you. I want you to take

"Mannister had no option but to go."

the first train you can catch and come here. You must come direct to Florence, and at the *Hotel Splendide* you will find a letter from me telling you how to reach this place. My father is with me, and also Mr. Phillimore. When you come I will explain."

Two nights afterwards he dined on the balcony of a long, low white villa overlooking the Adriatic, with the perfume of the orange groves floating from the land, and the soft sea-breeze, travelling across a sea almost as still as glass, rustling gently amongst the shrubs and lemon trees which encircled the house. After dinner she drew him on one side and pointed across the water, faintly agleam now vith the light of the rising moon, to a tiny island barely a mile away.

"I wonder," she said, "whether you can see amongst the trees there a little villa, the villa D'Ajuta they call it. It has been empty for three years. A fortnight ago it was taken by a countrywoman of ours."

He looked at it without interest.

"Well?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"Do you know," she said, "I am not sure even now whether I have been justified in sending you that letter. You see in Rome every one knows every one else's business. I have heard new things of my oldest friends, and amongst others I have heard things about Sir George Mannister."

He smiled a little wearily.

"People have had many things to say about me," he answered, "and I fear that it could have been nothing good that you heard from the tongues of gossips."

"I heard this, at any rate," she answered, "that for two years you had travelled about in the fashion of a man who seeks something which he can never find. I heard other things, and I heard other people's construction of these things and of your journeyings, and then I put them together and I came to a different conclusion from any of them, and I may have been right, and I may have been wrong, but I sent for you to tell you that I believe that the woman who has taken the

villa that you can see amongst the trees there, is the woman for whom you have been searching these last two years."

Mannister would take no boatman, or heed the warnings of those who spoke to him of the sudden squalls. It seemed to him that the suppressed energy of years throbbed in his muscles as he drove the long sharp-prowed boat through the still waters. He felt no fatigue. He looked neither to the right nor to the left, only turning occasionally to glance at that faintly burning light towards which he held his way. The phosphorus which gleamed in the water, which dropped even amongst the spray which fell from his oars, he took no heed of. The brown-sailed fishing smack which crossed his bows, with a quaint horn lantern hanging from the mast, passed him unnoticed. He returned no answer to the musical greetings of the men who lounged there smoking their long cigarettes. To him there was but one object in life, and he attained it when he drove with one last powerful stroke his little boat on to the sandy beach of the island

toward which May Dunster had pointed. He scarcely waited to ship his oars and make the boat secure. Up through a little avenue of trees, whose perfume seemed to make fragrant the cool night, he hastened toward the villa. One by one the lights had been extinguished, until at last when he reached the front he found the place in utter darkness. He stumbled round until he found a door, and hammered at it until an elderly man-servant drew back the chains and showed himself. It struck Mannister from the first that he was not so much surprised as one living on an island might be at a midnight visitor. Mannister inquired impatiently for his mistress. The man stretched out his hands. Only this afternoon, he explained, the Signora had departed. She had had news. It might have been bad, it might have been good. He could not say. But he only knew that she had gone. For a month, perhaps, or two—who could tell? She had promised to write, but certain it was that she had gone, and gone for some time.

Mannister was at first incredulous. He

produced gold, but the old man, though his eyes were lit with desire, kept to his story.

"I will show the Signor," he declared, "every room in the villa, and he will see that the Signora has indeed gone."

Mannister accepted his challenge. The villa was a small one, the apartments in the front of the house were certainly all empty, and showed signs of a hasty departure. There were traces of packing, several trunks were already there ready for forwarding, and the rooms themselves were devoid of any signs of present occupation. Mannister asked for pen and ink, and wrote a letter.

"You have trunks there," he said, "to forward to the Signora. You will forward with them this letter."

He placed gold upon the table, and the old man promised. Then Mannister rowed back to the mainland, but he rowed as a man exhausted and tired, and daylight was breaking eastward before his journey was over. Then he went wearily up to his room and slept.

On the morrow he turned homeward again. For three weeks he stayed in his rooms.

Then one night he received a telegram from Rome.

"I am breaking a promise," it said, "but I do it for your sake. Meet the Continental train at Victoria, due 6.45."

Mannister was there half an hour before the train was due, only to find that it was an hour late. Restlessly he walked up and down the platform. Was this, then, to be the end of his search, a meeting in a railway station? What could he say to her there, or she to him? What was there to be said? What could be the possible outcome? His heart sank, and rose again as he thought over the possibilities of the next few minutes. At one time it seemed to him that he was following a will-o'-the-wisp. At another he felt that the new life which he knew so well was possible to him, might start within the next few hours. The train came, and with a fever of impatience he peered into the carriages as they glided by. And then, exactly opposite to him as the train stopped, a tall, heavily veiled woman stepped out on to the platform almost into his arms.

"The longer she looked the more the terror which at first had seized her seemed to pass away."

"Christine!" he said, and held out his hands.

The woman clutched at the shoulder of her maid, who was close behind. She looked at Mannister as one might look at a ghost. Mannister calmly took the cloak from her arm and held her hand in his.

"Christine," he said, "I have been looking for you for more than two years. It has seemed a very long time that you have been coming. Won't you give your maid that luggage ticket? She can take your things wherever you will. The carriage is waiting for you and for me at the entrance here."

She looked long and steadily into his face, and the longer she looked the more the terror which at first had seized her seemed to pass away.

"George," she whispered, "is it possible that you have forgiven?"

"It is possible," he answered, "it is true. I am here to welcome you home."

She passed her arm through his, and a little sob broke from her throat.

"And you have been looking for me," she murmured, "for two years, and all the time I have been flying from you, terrified. And I have been lonely all the time."

Mannister laughed softly as he handed her into his brougham.

"I, too," he answered, "but that is over."

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